



DESTRUCTION AND RESTORATION, 1814–1817

After two decades of construction, in 1814 the Capitol consisted of the north and south wings joined by a two-story wooden gangway spanning the area intended for the rotunda. Half of the north wing had been rebuilt with masonry vaults while the other half retained its decaying floors and sagging ceilings. The south wing boasted what was probably the most beautiful room in America, the hall of the House of Representatives. Progress was slow, but it was being built for the ages, a permanent ornament for the republic's future. Yet, in the span of a few minutes, the course of the Capitol's construction—and the nation's honor—suffered a humiliating blow when British torches and gunpowder reduced twenty-one years of hard work to a pathetic pair of smoldering ruins.

In the history of American military conflicts, the War of 1812 is perhaps the least understood—almost as little then as today. The unprepared country was nudged, then pushed, into declaring war on the United Kingdom by land-hungry congressmen with their sights set on securing the frontier by conquering Canada and driving British

outposts and their Indian allies from lands east of the Mississippi River. Rights of neutrality and impressment of American seamen may have given the war a moral foundation, but it was the desire for territorial conquest that drove the country into hostilities with a far superior enemy. The leader of the “War Hawks” was Henry Clay, whose preposterous boast that the Kentucky militia alone could conquer Montreal and Upper Canada was taken as gospel by followers in the south and west. New England Federalists lent little support for the war, dubbing it “Mr. Madison's War.” Their commercial interests suffered greatly from the policies of both the Jefferson and Madison administrations, and their sympathies were squarely with England, their largest trading partner.

The first year of the war was a virtual stalemate. American troops were unable to muster an invasion of Canada, and the English army was too distracted by Napoleon to win decisive victories in North America. In 1813, Oliver Hazard Perry's victory on Lake Erie and the death of Tecumseh at the battle of the Thames boosted American morale, although they failed to translate into a meaningful military advantage. In April 1813, a ragtag force led by Henry Dearborn slipped into Upper Canada and raided its capital city of York (now Toronto), burning the legislative hall and governor's house.

In 1814, with Napoleon's exile to Elba, the British navy was free to launch its own offensives to harass American ports. Its targets were Niagara,

Capitol in Ruins (Detail)

by George Munger, 1814 or 1815

Kiplinger Washington Collection

Lake Champlain, New Orleans, and the towns of the Chesapeake Bay tidewater. On August 22, 1814, about 4,500 British troops were in southern Maryland, only sixteen miles from Washington. They landed from ships that avoided the well-defended Potomac by sailing up the Patuxent River instead. In command were Admiral Sir George Cockburn of the Royal Navy and General Robert Ross of the British Army. Washington was their target, and their proximity triggered a stampede of 90 percent of the inhabitants out of the city. By August 24, about 5,000 men under the command of General William H. Winder awaited British soldiers and sailors at Bladensburg, a little town at the edge of the federal territory. The ensuing battle was quickly decided in the enemy's favor. The Americans swiftly retreated to Tenleytown and then further to Rockville, fifteen miles northwest of Washington. (So snappy were Americans in retreat, the skirmish was later referred to as the "Bladensburg Races.") To avenge the American raid on its Canadian capital, the British army and navy had come to pay a return call on the capital of the United States.

A considerable amount of public property was destroyed by retreating Americans. Commodore Thomas Tingey, head of the Navy Yard, set it on fire. Losses included a new frigate, a warship, gunboats, and valuable provisions, rope, canvass, and other supplies. The lone bridge across the Potomac was also destroyed before the invading army marched into the nearly deserted town.

Once the British captured Washington, enemy troops set about destroying the public buildings. Fires in the Capitol began to be set just after nine in the evening.¹ In the south wing, some rooms in the office story were vandalized by means of a gunpowder paste brushed on woodwork surrounding doors and windows and set ablaze. Papers and furniture in the clerk's office offered a large quantity of combustible material. After it was set on fire, the heat forced troops to withdraw, leaving nearby rooms on the west side of the wing uninjured. Among the irreplaceable losses were the secret journals of Congress kept by the clerk of the House. Upstairs in the House chamber, rockets were fired through the roof but its iron covering would not burn. Failing that, furniture was gathered into a pile in the center of the room, slathered with gunpowder paste, and set on fire. Helping fuel the fire was the new floor recently built over the old one,

which doubled the stockpile of seasoned wood there. The heat was so intense that glass in the skylights melted and the colonnade was heavily injured (but did not fall).² Although supported precariously, the entablature did not collapse; the wooden ceiling, however, was completely destroyed. Within minutes, Latrobe's magnum opus was reduced to ruins. But just outside, the circular vestibule with its elegant stone columns (called today the "small House rotunda") survived. The east lobby and principal staircase survived as well. Indeed, though the chamber was completely ruined, much of the scenic approach to it was not damaged at all. Still, the loss was horrific.

Damage to the north wing was more extensive due to the combustible materials located throughout the library area. That part of the north wing still had the wooden joists, laths, and floors installed in the 1790s, which burned fiercely despite widespread rot. The library's furniture, books, maps, and manuscripts helped fuel the flames. The intensity of the fire in that part of the north wing inflicted the heaviest damage to the exterior walls, part of which nearly collapsed. The marble columns in the Senate chamber were reduced to lime and fell down, and the room was left "a most magnificent ruin."³ The Supreme Court was heavily damaged but its Doric columns stood—weakened but straight. Latrobe's prize "corn cob" columns were also spared. The incendiaries concentrated their efforts on the principal rooms and did minimal damage to lobbies, halls, and staircases, which were, after all, their escape route out of the wreckage. Still, the British undertook their mission thoroughly and professionally.

At the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, troops continued their trouble making. Around 11 o'clock in the evening, the President's House was burned. The torch was put to the War and Treasury departments the next morning. While destroying the arsenal at Greenleaf's Point, about 100 British soldiers were killed when they accidentally ignited 130 barrels of gunpowder they were tossing down a well. The explosion hit like an earthquake, leaving behind a crater forty feet in diameter: mangled bodies were strewn far and wide.⁴

As a counterpoint to the destruction of the public buildings, British respect for private property was, on the whole, admirable. Samuel Harrison Smith's *National Intelligencer* printing office



was vandalized, but largely because of its role as an administration mouthpiece. Daniel Carroll's hotel was burned, but it may have been ignited by a wayward spark from the nearby Capitol. Two row houses built by George Washington were deliberately set on fire. But the Patent Office was saved by its superintendent, Dr. Thornton, who argued that patent models were owned by their inventors and were therefore private property.

Just before Washington fell to the enemy, President Madison fled to Virginia. At dawn on August 26, he crossed the Potomac into Maryland, reaching Rockville at six o'clock in the evening. There he expected to find the remnants of General Wilder's army, but they had left for Baltimore some hours earlier. The president and his party pushed eastward to Brookville, a small Quaker community where Madison took refuge in the home of Caleb Bentley and his wife Henrietta. In an ironic twist of history, the silversmith who made the cornerstone plate deposited by the first president at the Capitol in 1793 now fed and sheltered the fourth president while the Capitol smoldered in ruins.

On September 1, 1814, President Madison issued a proclamation calling on Americans to unite and "chastise and expel the invader." Despite the fact that peace talks were under way, the enemy had deliberately disregarded "the rules of civilized warfare." They had wantonly destroyed

The Capitol in Ruins

by George Munger, 1814 or 1815

Kiplinger Washington Collection

*S*ightseers came to Capitol Hill to examine the forlorn wings after they were damaged by British troops on the evening of August 24, 1814.

public buildings, which according to Madison were not being used for "military annoyance."⁵

Three and a half weeks after British troops left, Congress returned to witness firsthand the extent of damage. Thomas Munroe was asked to prepare Blodgett's Hotel (home of the Patent and Post Offices) as a temporary Capitol, and there a committee was appointed to investigate the British successes in their "enterprises against this metropolis."⁶ Yet the causes were understood all too well. An inadequate defense by an inadequate militia, in the face of seasoned and well-equipped troops, was only the latest humiliation suffered in this badly managed war. The real question before Congress was whether to remain in Washington or to move the capital to a more central, secure, and convenient location. The usual forces sprang into action at the mere mention of relocating the seat of government, a replay of the intrigues surrounding the Residence Act a generation earlier. By October 20 the decision was made to stay in Washington,

but other questions needed to be settled. Some did not believe the damaged buildings should be repaired and preferred to build new ones in new locations from new, more economical designs. A committee of the House was appointed to investigate the matter and reported its recommendation on November 21, 1814. It asked the superintendent of the city to examine the existing building shells with architects and builders. After conferring with George Hadfield, Munroe reported that the walls of the Capitol and President's House were safe and sufficiently strong to be restored. He reported that \$1,215,111 had been expended on the public buildings so far and that it would require about \$460,000 to repair the fire damage.⁷ Thus, Munroe implied, it would be cheaper to repair the structures than to build anew. The committee agreed to restore the Capitol and President's House and to give no further consideration to the idea of replacing these buildings. Reminding the House that the location of the Capitol was selected by Washington, who considered it part of the original plan of the city and thus sacrosanct, the committee recommended making a small appropriation to protect the ruins from further decay. Most important, it reported that several banks in the District of Columbia had made offers to lend the government \$500,000 for repairs. Banks were anxious to provide financial backing for something so vital to their interests, and while it was not part of the committee's assignment to report on money matters, it thought the loan offer not "irrelevant to the object of their inquiries."⁸

During the first week of February, Congress debated the questions surrounding the repair of the public buildings. Senator Eligius Fromentin of Louisiana urged his colleagues to authorize construction of a "large, convenient, and unadorned house" near Georgetown to serve as the new Capitol. The vast city dotted with small clusters of buildings reminded him of scattered camps of desert nomads. A plain building for Congress was preferable to an elaborate one because, he reasoned, "Our laws to be wholesome, need not be enacted in a palace." Building sites selected by the first president were not sacred because the conditions of the city and nation had changed so dramatically. The treasury was empty, prosperity had vanished, and commerce was at an end. What would Washington recommend under these circumstances? Repairing

the public buildings would take at least ten years and would cost much more than predicted. In Fromentin's opinion, the only sensible course was to abandon the remote Capitol and construct an inexpensive hall between Georgetown and the President's House. By a vote of twenty to thirteen, however, his effort failed to derail the movement to repair the public buildings on their original sites.⁹

In the House of Representatives, there was disagreement about which buildings should be given priority and whether the cabinet offices should be relocated. There was an idea, offered by Charles Goldsborough of Maryland, to rebuild the Capitol and offices but to postpone repairs to the President's House until times of "leisure and tranquility." While that Federalist congressman was in no hurry to return Madison to his palace, the House disagreed with him by a large majority. Another Federalist, Thomas P. Grosvenor of New York, wanted to relocate the executive offices nearer to the Capitol where members of Congress would have ready access to cabinet secretaries. After some debate, the House agreed.¹⁰ The following day, Virginia Congressman Joseph Lewis, a member of the Committee on the District of Columbia, addressed the House with strong arguments against relocating cabinet departments. He spoke at length about Washington's reasons for putting the buildings next to the President's House and quoted correspondence between the first president and the old board of commissioners. Lewis explained that while the government was in Philadelphia, cabinet members complained about frequent interruptions by legislators who made it impossible to attend to their duties. Thus, when it came time to select sites for these departments in the new city, they were very properly located near the president, whose business with cabinet secretaries was routine. Lewis continued his address to include the subject of repairs to the public buildings, which he did not want delayed or curtailed. He said that he would rebuild them precisely as they had been, not changing one brick or stone.

Opponents, led by Daniel Webster of New Hampshire, wanted to postpone repairs until the end of the war when money would be in greater supply and consideration could be given again to removing the seat of government—preferably back to Philadelphia. Spending large sums of money to repair the buildings would anchor the government

more firmly on the banks of the Potomac. Webster and his friends wanted no more of the federal city, which they considered miserable and inconvenient. But Lewis argued that constant threats of removal inhibited investment in the city, thereby causing the discomforts that were the source of so much complaint. “The people of this District are political orphans,” Lewis declared, “They have been abandoned by their legitimate parents Instead of extending to them the parental hand of affection, we do all in our power to blight and destroy their fair prospects.” He believed that, if treated fairly by Congress, the city would rival the most important towns of the Union in both wealth and population. Following his speech, a vote defeated the proposal of relocating the executive departments to Capitol Hill.¹¹ In each vote, opponents of the federal city were thwarted. Cries for economy or for contracting the city plan were drowned by louder voices for restoration to the *status quo ante bellum*. On February 13, 1815, President Madison approved legislation authorizing the government to borrow \$500,000 (at 6 percent interest) to repair and restore the President’s House, the Capitol, and the cabinet offices “on their present sites in the city of Washington.”¹² The battle over the permanent residence of Congress had been won a second time by the friends of the Potomac with an unexpected reaffirmation of Washington and L’Enfant’s vision of an extensive capital city.

LATROBE’S RETURN

 On March 10, 1815, Madison appointed a three-man commission to administer monies borrowed to repair the public buildings. Congress had not authorized such a commission, but the president took it upon himself to create one based on the precedent found in the Residence Act of 1790. At \$1,600 per year, the salary fixed for members of the new commission was the same given members of the former board. A great deal of trouble and worry was lifted from the president’s shoulders by such a body, shielding him from the controversies that inevitably spring up around large public projects. The first commissioner to be named was John Van Ness, whose

anonymous newspaper attacks caused Latrobe much embarrassment in 1809. A former congressman from New York, Van Ness was married to the daughter of David Burns, one of the original landowners of what became the city of Washington. Tench Ringgold, a member of a prominent Maryland family, filled the second seat. Last was Richard Bland Lee, a former Virginia congressman who had moved to Washington in 1814. All three were well connected, but like members of the old board of commissioners, none had experience in architecture or building. They quickly hired James Hoban to restore the President’s House, which had been left little more than a burned-out shell by the British. The sandstone exterior walls, the brick interior walls, the kitchen stove, and a few scraps of hardware were all that survived.¹³ Hoban was known for getting the job done and was their only choice. But the Capitol presented a different problem. Latrobe was, by his own admission, obnoxious to the president and Congress, and more convivial architects, including Robert Mills and J. J. Ramée, had applied for the position. The commissioners might have preferred either of them, but Latrobe’s experience with the Capitol’s surviving structure made up for his unpopularity.

Twelve days after the work was authorized, Latrobe wrote Madison offering his services. He stated that he was still sensitive to the charge of extravagance, which he claimed was shared with every architect “from the most ancient times, and in every nation.” He said that he may not deserve the appointment, but he wanted it to avoid the embarrassment of someone else restoring the building he had done so much to create.¹⁴

The letter was written by a man in the throes of doubt and depression. Latrobe’s time in Pittsburgh had been a disastrous strain on his mind and pocketbook, consisting of a failed adventure in steam engines and river boats. Troubled by debt and facing a future without hope or happiness, Latrobe was suffering a nervous breakdown that rendered him listless, confining him to his room. His wife, Mary Elizabeth Hazlehurst Latrobe, fearing for her husband’s health, looked to Washington for help. Without her husband’s knowledge, she wrote President Madison, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander J. Dallas, General John Mason, Pennsylvania Congressman Charles Ingersoll, and others to ask help in reinstating her husband to the

position of surveyor of public buildings. Her discreet intercession helped carry the day and on March 14, 1815, the commissioners wrote Latrobe with an offer of an interview that might lead to employment. A description of how the architect received the offer was written by his wife some years afterwards:

The next day I received a large Packet with the President's seal, containing a recall for my husband to resume his former situation—never can I forget the transport I felt in going to him as he reclined in deep depression in the easy chair. I presented him the Packet. Behold, I said, what Providence has done for you! and what your poor weak wife has been made the humble instrument in obtaining. He threw himself on my breast and wept like a child—so true it is that women can bear many trials better than men! I received at the same time answers to the several letters I had written to the gentlemen, and of the kindest and most gratifying tenor, all acknowledging that there was 'No man in the country but Mr. Latrobe as filling the situation he had hitherto held.' Nothing could equal the surprise of my husband on the receipt of this packet, as he did not know of the means I had taken to procure his return.¹⁵

On the day he received the commissioners' letter (March 22, 1815) Latrobe wrote his acceptance of the offer it brought. Giving himself a few days to settle business in Pittsburgh, he promised to be in Washington by April 15. Annoyed by Latrobe's dally, the commissioner's replied that architects from New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore awaited

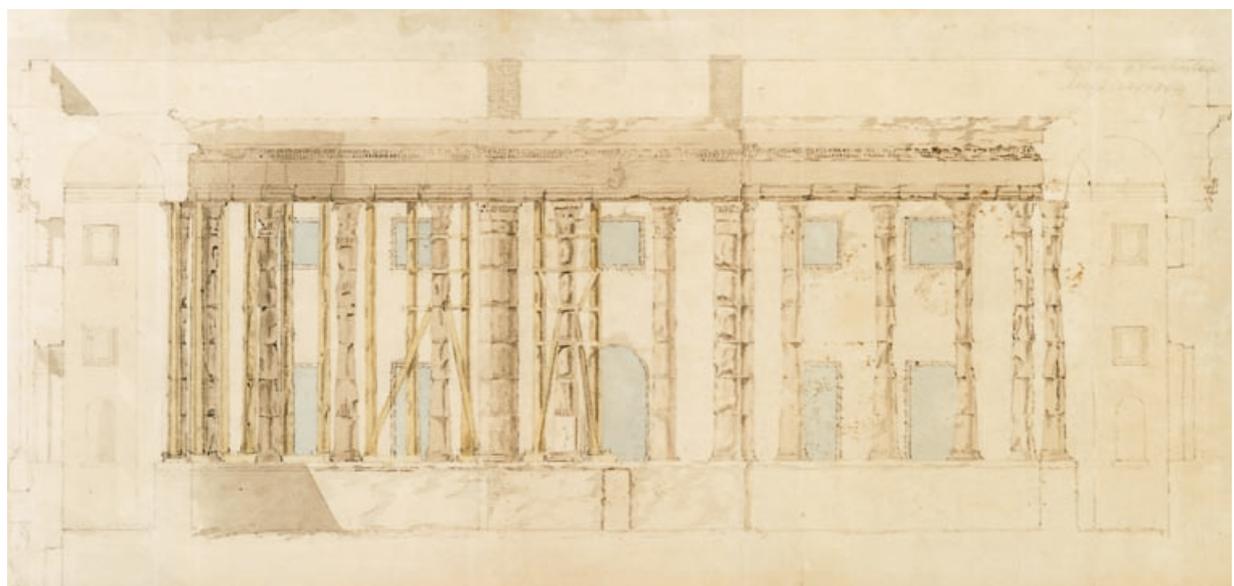
their decision and the delay was hardly convenient.¹⁶ Latrobe had taken the commissioners' letter as a job offer, while they had only asked him to come for an interview. Their testy reply to Latrobe's first letter did not bode well for a happy relationship in the future.

One day late, Latrobe arrived back in Washington on Sunday morning, April 16, 1815. He took a room at the Washington Hotel, where he changed clothes, and went immediately to see John Van Ness. Whatever quarrel Van Ness had with Latrobe in the past was apparently forgotten, because he received the architect with "wonderful friendliness," even inviting him to lodge in his home. Latrobe declined the invitation and soon they joined Tench Ringgold and visited the Capitol. Latrobe described the sight as a "melancholy spectacle." He was proud that so much had survived—"the picturesque entrance to the house of Representatives with its handsome columns, the Corn Capitals of the Senate Vestibule, the Great staircase, and the Vaults of the Senate chamber . . . Some of the Committee rooms of the south wing are not even soiled." He had prepared himself for a scene of far greater ruin and was pleased that "the mischief is much more easily repaired than would appear at first sight."¹⁷

During his visit with Van Ness and Ringgold, Latrobe learned that Hoban had been hired to restore the President's House and that his work would be confined to the Capitol. Thus, his title

Ruins of the House Chamber
attributed to Giovanni Andrei, 1814 or 1815

Only vestiges of the Corinthian colonnade remained after the fire. Long poles were used to prevent the entablature from falling and crushing the floor.



would not be the surveyor of public buildings, but rather architect of the Capitol or surveyor of the Capitol. The arrangement did not displease him, but he did wince at the salary—\$1,600 per year—the same as that of a commissioner. Van Ness told him that there was no shortage of architects willing to be employed at that salary and, indeed, Hoban had agreed to it without complaint. After some negotiations Latrobe agreed to the salary so long as he also received \$300 more to move his family to Washington and an allowance to rent a house.¹⁸

Latrobe was put under contract to restore the wings of the Capitol on April 18, 1815. The commissioners asked if work should proceed on both wings simultaneously or if it would be wiser to repair the south wing first and then turn to the north wing. In a remarkably naive question, they also asked if it would be possible to have the hall of the House ready for use in December.¹⁹ Latrobe reported that a great deal of effort would be necessary to stabilize the north wing but after that it would be possible (he did not say advisable) to focus entirely on the other wing. As for the likelihood of seating the House of Representatives in its chamber eight months hence, he answered “*in the negative*.” Even if all the materials were on hand and all the workmen hired, it would be impossible. And, as he reminded the commissioners, “*rapid building is bad building*.” Latrobe then said the hall would be ready in December of 1816 and both wings would be completely restored by the end of 1817. As if the past had taught him nothing, Latrobe again created expectations that would be impossible to fulfill.

Most of Latrobe’s first report to the commissioners was an assessment of existing conditions and the steps necessary to protect the wings from further decay. He proposed to construct a board roof over the south wing pitched from the window sills of the attic story. Rain would be discharged through gutters out the window openings. A scaffold built on the floor of the chamber would help support the roof. Under cover, the colonnade would be dismantled, a job requiring great caution because of the danger of it falling and crushing the vaults supporting the floor. The temporary roof would also allow the rooms in the office story to dry. A temporary roof was needed over the north wing as well. Materials to be ordered immediately included 60,000 feet of rough boards, scaffolding

poles, 500 tons of freestone, 1,000 barrels of lime, and all the bricks that could be had. Carpenters were needed to enclose the grounds for a stone yard and to construct the temporary roofs. Laborers of all sorts were needed in vast numbers. Particularly important were stone cutters, whom Latrobe thought would be difficult to hire in sufficient numbers for the work ahead.²⁰

RETHINKING THE HALL OF THE HOUSE

When discussing the need for an abundant supply of building stone, Latrobe reported that “The interior of the Hall of Representatives will be carried up entirely in freestone if the room should be rebuilt exactly upon the former design.” This statement was the earliest indication that the architect had something different in mind. On the job just two days, Latrobe was mulling over an idea for a chamber that first occurred to him in 1803. His initial idea had been a chamber in the form of a half-domed semicircle without columns. Jefferson overruled the proposal because it was too great a departure from the accepted plan. With Jefferson now retired, Latrobe felt the time had come to again propose a half-domed semicircle for the House of Representatives. This one, however, would have a magnificent colonnade, which was such a popular feature in the former hall. It would replicate the former colonnade with Grecian columns modeled after the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates and an entablature with Roman modillions: an enduring Jefferson-Latrobe collaboration.

In a matter of days Latrobe wrote a report on the south wing to accompany a plan and section of a new design for the House.²¹ He discussed the complaints lodged against the old room and explained how the new design would solve all former problems. Difficulties with acoustics, lighting, and ventilation would be vanquished by adopting the new plan. Latrobe indicated that acoustics was the least important defect and was usually the cause of gripes only when the chamber was filled with rowdy members or the galleries crowded with noisy spectators. When order prevailed, acoustics

was never a problem. Even so, the plan and form of the semicircular Senate chamber, “the best room of debate in America,” made it a better model for the new hall of the House. His anatomical theater at the University of Pennsylvania, the ancient Theater of Bacchus in Athens, and the legislative halls erected in Paris since the revolution were other examples of semicircular rooms used successfully for lectures and debates.

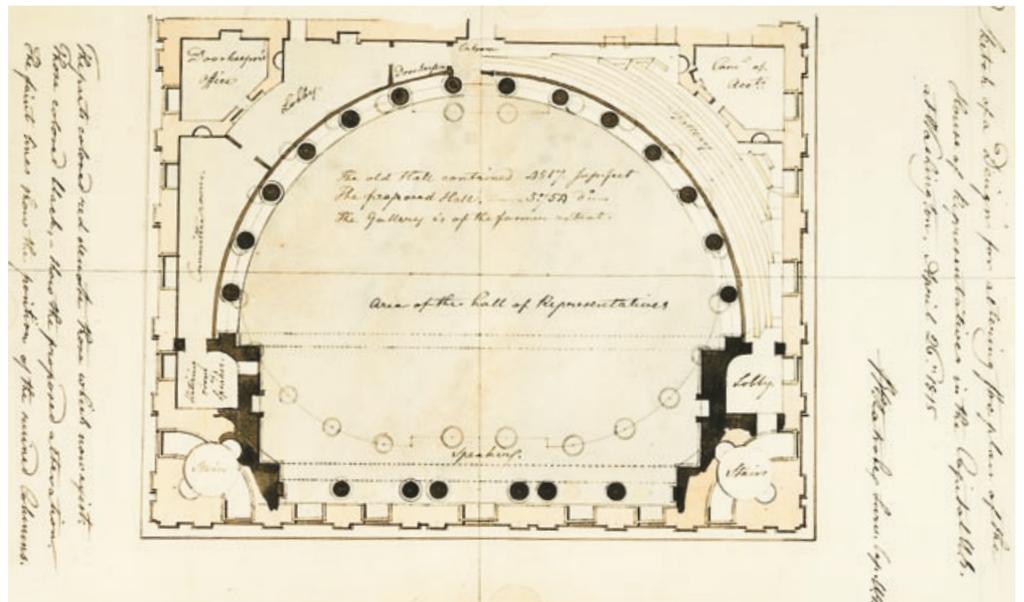
Problems with light and ventilation would also be solved by the new plan. The hall would have

direct access to the windows along the south wall and the ceiling would support a lantern twenty feet in diameter. “Not only will the room be ventilated in the most perfect manner and kept cool in the hottest weather,” Latrobe promised, “but all complaint against insufficient light will be at once and forever removed.” Although numerous, the former skylights had not provided enough light to the hall because so many were covered with canvasses to control glare or stop leaks. Protected by a dormer, only one skylight in the old hall could be opened

Sketch of a Design for altering the plan of the House of Representatives in the Capitol U. S. at Washington

by B. Henry Latrobe, 1815

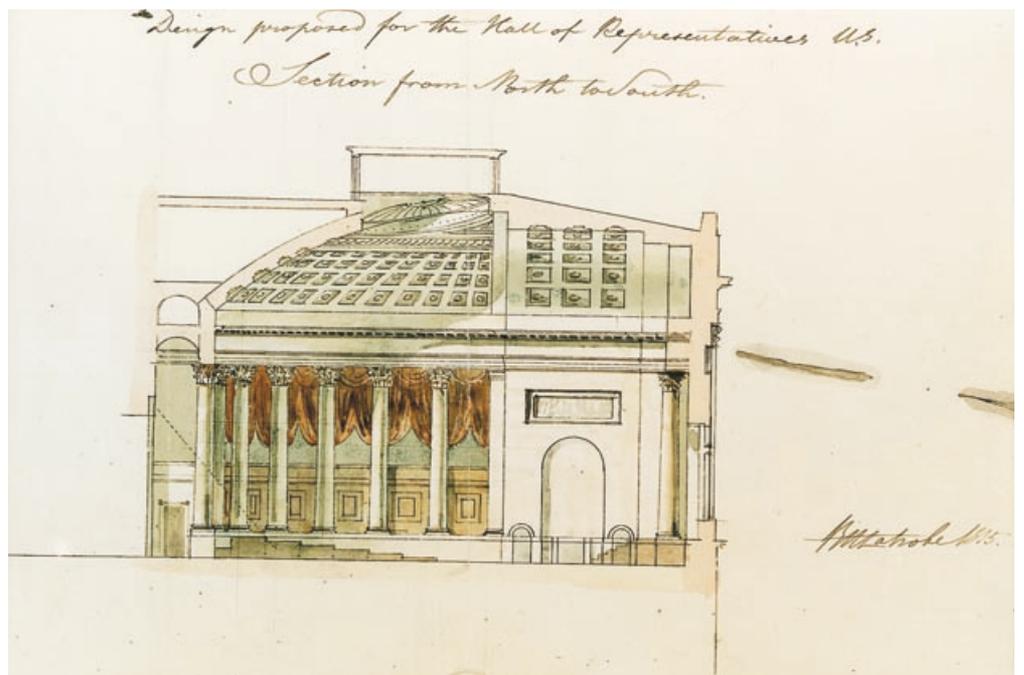
A few days after Latrobe began his second career at the Capitol, he redesigned the hall of the House in the form of a classical theater. The plan shows alterations necessary to carry out the new design—the old walls are shown in light red and the new work is shown in black. Faint circles indicate the position of the former colonnade.



Design proposed for the Hall of Representatives U. S. Section from North to South

by B. Henry Latrobe, 1815

This small drawing beautifully conveys the essence of Latrobe’s second design for the House chamber with its semicircular colonnade, coffered dome, and central lantern. Columns shown against the south wall (right) would later be brought out to provide a loggia behind the Speaker’s rostrum.



and was inadequate to the object of ventilation. A lantern with vertical sash would allow diffused light to enter the hall and a large volume of warm air to leave it. After years of battling Jefferson over lanterns, Latrobe hoped Madison and the commissioners would approve this practical feature.

Practical considerations aside, Latrobe also noted that the style of the old room was better suited to a theater than to a legislative chamber. He claimed it had “an air of magnificence bordering on ostentation and levity.” The new design was less like a theater and, since he was the architect of both, he said he should be allowed to state his decided preference for the new plan.

Latrobe ended his description of the new design with a request for a speedy decision so he could begin ordering materials. The commissioners were impressed with the “improved plan,” as they called it, and recommended it to the president but did not forward the architect’s report or drawings to him. Writing from his Virginia estate, “Montpelier,” Madison replied that it would be best not to deviate from the former design unless it was approved by Congress. He respected Latrobe’s judgment but could not evaluate the merits of the case from where he was: “I suspend an opinion, until I can form one with the advantage of being on the spot.”²²

Had Madison been in the company of his friend and neighbor, Thomas Jefferson, to discuss Latrobe’s plan it is unlikely that it would have been approved. At least the old subject of lanterns would have resurfaced. Jefferson first learned of the revised plan in a letter from Dr. Thornton, who wanted to restore the House chamber to the elliptical plan shown in the old “conference plan” of 1793. He had just learned of Latrobe’s proposal for a semicircular hall and wanted to put a stop to it as soon as possible. A further deviation from the original plan would place Thornton farther away from his claim (which always ignored Hallet) as its author. Thornton claimed that the ellipse was a superior form because it lacked “those little breaks that destroy the unity, grandeur, and dignity of Architecture.” It would foster a better room for debate because an ellipse contains no part of a circle that creates “repercussion of sound.”²³ Jefferson, however, was not in the habit of interfering with Madison’s administration and did nothing

about Thornton’s letter. He had heard enough from Latrobe regarding the many defects of the elliptical plan. When Madison returned to Washington he was able to judge the case “on the spot” and, by June 20, 1815, Latrobe’s semicircular plan for the House of Representatives had been approved.

ANDREI’S MISSION

While the commissioners studied the revised plan for the House of Representatives, Latrobe wrote them about the chamber’s columns.²⁴ Whether the old plan was retained or the new plan adopted, either scheme would require a great deal of architectural carving for the column capitals. In the former room, Giovanni Andrei had carved the capitals in place and, after eight years, they were not yet finished when the room was destroyed. The work was done while Congress was out of session, and each time Andrei was about to begin, furniture had to be moved and a scaffold built. The whole process was slow and expensive. Latrobe calculated that each column capital had cost \$600. He proposed the commissioners send Andrei to Italy, where in a few months he could supervise carving of all the capitals needed for the hall of the House. By Andrei’s own estimate, capitals could be carved and shipped to America for \$300 each. Not only would the work be faster and cheaper, but pure white Italian marble would be more beautiful than the coarse brown sandstone used formerly. Latrobe felt Andrei should supervise carvers in Italy because if they were left to their own devices each capital would be “the production of the fanciful taste of the Sculptor, cheap in execution and dashing in effect, but wholly unworthy of the situation it would occupy.” Andrei was thoroughly converted to Latrobe’s taste for Grecian architecture and he would insure that the design would be faithfully executed.

If the commissioners agreed to the proposal, Andrei could also undertake another mission, namely finding someone to execute the allegorical statuary formerly modeled and carved by Giuseppe Franzoni, who had died on April 6, 1815. Unless a replacement was found, Latrobe feared, “the decoration of the Capitol must be confined to

foliage.” Andrei knew Washington manners and working conditions, placing him in an ideal position to find someone of the right temper to assimilate into American society.

In a few weeks the commissioners approved Latrobe’s suggestion.²⁵ By the time Andrei’s instructions were written on August 8, his mission had expanded to include the carving of Ionic capitals for four columns and two pilasters in the Senate chamber and four Ionic capitals for the President’s House. He and his wife would depart Baltimore on the U. S. Corvette *John Adams* for Barcelona, where another navy vessel would provide passage to Leghorn. Andrei was expected to employ carvers in nearby Carrara, keeping in mind the commissioners’ admonition to take care of the public interest by having the work executed in the best materials at reasonable prices. The entire cargo of thirty-four capitals should be packed and ready to leave Italy by April 1, 1816, a deadline so important that the commissioners stated it twice. While abroad, Andrei continued to draw his salary of \$1,500 a year (he had been placed back on the public rolls on August 4) and was allowed \$1,200 for expenses. He was authorized to employ a master sculptor as skillful as the late Franzoni, who should agree to come to America for three or four years to work on the Capitol. Passage to and from Washington would be paid by the commissioners. Two “inferior” sculptors should also be engaged as assistants with pay appropriate to their talents. The commissioners concluded their instructions by wishing Andrei “a pleasant voyage to your native country, a successful execution of your labors, and a safe return to Washington.”²⁶

The first three weeks of Latrobe’s re-employment in Washington had been remarkably productive. He redesigned the House chamber, proposed Andrei’s trip abroad, and organized the workmen. Many of the same men employed on the public buildings before the war applied for jobs soon after Congress authorized restoration and repairs. Upon Latrobe’s return, he appointed Shadrach Davis clerk of the works, Leonard Harbaugh foreman of carpenters, and George Blagden foreman of stone cutters. Wartime conditions in the federal city had been miserable for most workmen, who were saved from starvation by the resumption of the public works. Things were now much better for the building trades, and Latrobe was happy to have so many talented and contented workmen at his disposal.

Latrobe set off for Pittsburgh on May 10, 1815, to pack up his family for their return to Washington. During the trip he made a detour to inspect a newly discovered deposit of marble near the Potomac River in Loudoun County, Virginia. From Cumberland, Maryland, he wrote Van Ness that it seemed inexhaustible and equal to Carrara marble. It also appeared infinitely superior to Philadelphia marble.²⁷ When he inspected the marble again, it appeared to be “first rate quality as to texture, and purity of Color,” but due to its position in the ground with rock above and below it, Latrobe thought that it would be expensive to quarry. While impractical for present purposes, it was perhaps worth further investigation.²⁸

On the same trip, Latrobe found an outcrop of a beautiful variegated marble southeast of the Catoctin Mountains. The rock was found on both sides of the Potomac River in Loudoun County, Virginia, and Montgomery County, Maryland. It was composed of geologically fused pebbles of different colors, which he thought exceptionally beautiful when polished. Belonging to the family of sedimentary stone called breccia, Potomac “marble” was sometimes referred to as “puddling stone” or “pebble marble.” (It was not a marble but was usually referred to as such.) The existence of a beautiful variegated stone so convenient to water transportation was an exciting discovery that meant column shafts could possibly be wrought from single blocks and delivered with little land carriage.²⁹ Latrobe thought the Potomac marble more beautiful than any used in modern or ancient buildings, and it promised to be a fine replacement for much of the coarse brown sandstone universally used on the public buildings in Washington.

Characteristically, the quarries at Aquia were not delivering stone fast enough to keep pace with the demands of the Capitol and President’s House. The need for “speedy completion of the National Buildings” prompted the commissioners to write stone merchants in East Haddam, Farmington, and Middletown, Connecticut asking about the quality, prices, and quantity of freestone available from quarries on the Connecticut River.³⁰ Letters back informed the commissioners that sandstone in Connecticut was plentiful enough, but was brown or red and not suitable for use at the Capitol or President’s House. Returning from a disappointing visit to Aquia, Blagden soon located about 400 tons of freestone at a

quarry on the Chapawamsic Creek in Stafford County, Virginia, that was left over from the 1790s building campaign. In 1794, the old board of commissioners had ordered 4,000 tons of this stone for the walls of the north wing. Some of it proved satisfactory, yet a good deal did not, and the board canceled the order. The quarry's owner still had the remaining stone in the yard, and Latrobe thought that if those blocks had survived two decades of weathering they might prove useful for his present purposes.³¹ The commissioners authorized Latrobe to purchase all the Chapawamsic stone that Blagden might approve.³²

Scarcity of stone was matched by a scarcity of men to cut it. Latrobe blamed the shortage mainly on the method used to pay stone cutters. The commissioners paid them by the day rather than by the piece. Thus, a lazy stonecutter or one of lesser skill commanded the same wage as a talented and diligent workman, one who would not stand for his superior industry to go unrewarded for long. Given the pay structure there was no reason to complete a stone-cutting task expeditiously. Without the means to make more money to keep up with the high cost of living, the best men were leaving Washington. Wages were lower in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, but rents were less and amenities greater in those places. Paying stone cutters by the piece would expedite the work, attract the best men, and cost no more than paying by the day. Latrobe recounted the story of a stone cutter named Haydock who was so motivated by piecework that he literally worked himself to death:

In boasting the upper blocks of the capitals of the columns, a man working fairly could finish one in about 4 days, perhaps in 3½. They were given to Haydock at \$8 each, and he began & finished one in a single day. It is true, he destroyed his health & lost his life ultimately by that day's work, but had he even taken two days to the business & saved his life, he would have earned double wages. By paying such a man \$2 or \$2.50 a day, while by the piece, he can earn \$4, no money is saved & much time is lost.³³

Perhaps Latrobe could have given a less extreme example to make his point, yet the commissioners agreed and authorized Latrobe to adopt the piecework system.³⁴

One of the most delicate tasks undertaken in the first year of restoration was demolition of the colonnade in the House chamber. Normally a scaff-

fold would be built to give workmen access to the upper parts of the stonework, but that was out of the question because of the danger of accidentally hitting a column. If one column were to topple, the whole colonnade and entablature would collapse, bringing down a hundred tons of stone and brick that would shatter the vaults supporting the floor. Workmen were afraid to touch the colonnade until it was shored up. Latrobe wanted to support the underside of the entablature with bundles of long sticks, but finding and cutting sticks would take time. Commissioner Ringgold came up with a better, money-saving plan. He suggested stacking common firewood between the columns up to the bottom of the entablature, which would thus be supported during demolition. Five hundred cords of wood would go half way around the room. Once the work was finished, the wood could be sold for cost, recouping a large expense. Using this approach, the colonnade was demolished in July without incident.³⁵

To supplement his income, Latrobe took a job as one of the city surveyors at an annual salary of \$1,200. Among outside architectural commissions, he earned \$300 designing an addition to Long's Tavern, located just east of the Capitol grounds. Begun on July 4, 1815, the addition was built to accommodate Congress until restoration work on the Capitol was finished. Latrobe's clients were a group of investors who wanted to return Congress to Capitol Hill and, by providing comfortable and convenient accommodations, squelch the persistent talk of moving the seat of government. Built in just five months, the "Brick Capitol" was ready at the opening of the 14th Congress in December 1815. Latrobe was not certain if Madison would order Congress out of Blodgett's Hotel and into the new building, but it could just as well be used for supper rooms, assembly halls, and card rooms.³⁶ Yet Congress happily vacated their quarters in the old hotel and met in Latrobe's handsome brick building through the end of the 15th Congress in 1819.

At the close of the 1815 building season, the restoration of the Capitol's north and south wings had made a modest start. Much of the blackened stone around window and door openings had been cut away and replaced with clean blocks. Workmen scrubbed the outside walls to remove smoke damage from stones that otherwise survived the fire. Temporary roofs had been placed over the two



Brick Capitol

ca. 1865

Mathew Brady Photograph, National Archives

*F*or clients wishing to return Congress to Capitol Hill, Latrobe designed an addition to Long's Tavern for the House and Senate to use while the Capitol was undergoing repairs. (Rent was \$1,650 a year.) Citizens worried that Congress would abandon the federal city and return to Philadelphia, a move that would have devastated the Washington real estate market.

After 1819, the “Old Brick Capitol” served as a rooming house where members of Congress boarded, particularly those from the south. Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, for example, died there in 1850. During the Civil War the building was commandeered by the government and converted into a military prison. It was demolished in 1867.

wings, demolition work had begun, and a vast quantity of rubbish had been removed. The new vaults in the committee rooms under the library in the north wing were completed, but this was the only new construction finished in 1815. A philosophical yet resolute Latrobe wrote an acquaintance in London:

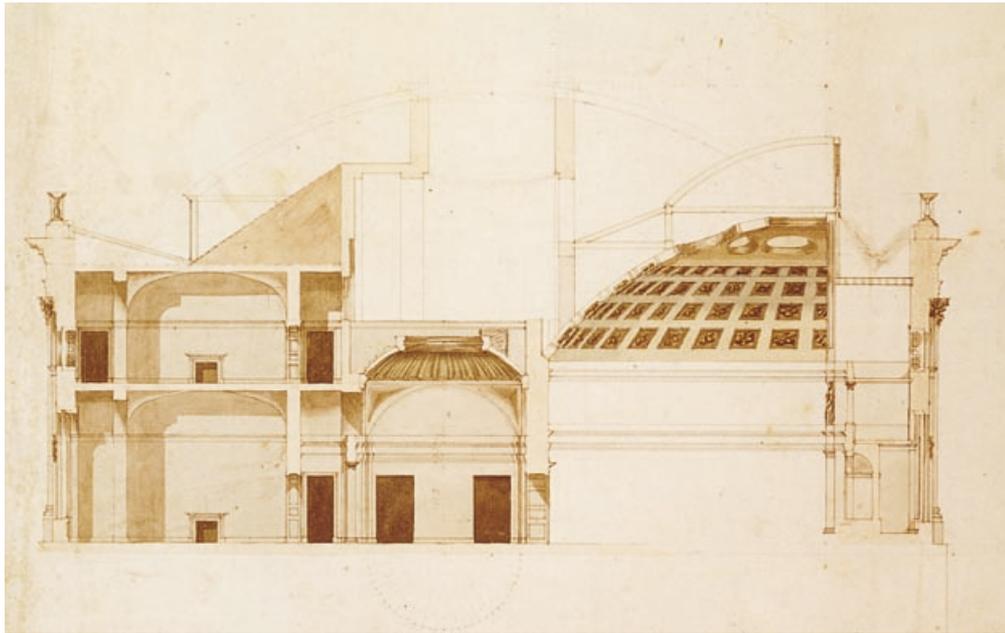
The labor of 10 Years of my life were destroyed in one night, but I am now busily engaged, in reestablishing them with increased splendor. I have already gotten rid of the sooty stains here, and hope your Government are taking the necessary means of washing them out of the his-

tory of England. The only fact that I regret deeply, is the destruction of our national Records. Every thing else money can replace.³⁷

RETHINKING THE SENATE CHAMBER

*I*n 1813 Vice President Elbridge Gerry talked with Latrobe about how the Senate chamber would accommodate members from new states. A year before, Louisiana had been admitted to the Union, and a fresh crop of new states awaited in the Mississippi, Michigan, Missouri, and Illinois territories. With each new state, two senators would be sent to Washington and Gerry feared the chamber was too small to seat them. The conversation was informal because Latrobe had been out of office since 1811 and his advice would have been given unofficially. His removal to Pittsburgh put aside any ideas that might have occurred to him at the time.

After the vice president's death in 1814, his concerns were taken up by a number of senators who consulted with Latrobe about space problems: they asked him to explore the options and put his ideas on paper. On February 21, 1816, he submitted a short report outlining his solution to the problem, illustrating it with plans and sections showing the old room and how he proposed to enlarge it.³⁸ The chamber could be rebuilt on an enlarged diameter, retaining the same form as the old room that the architect found so well suited to its purpose. To capture more space, Latrobe suggested removing the small staircase and the narrow range of water closets occupying the area behind the curving wall. By eliminating these features, it would be possible to enlarge the Senate chamber to a diameter of seventy-five feet, the greatest dimension possible without interfering with the central lobby. The new plan increased the diameter of the room by fifteen feet, giving enough room to accommodate senators from twenty-four or more states. The small gallery over the entrance lobby would be sacrificed but two larger galleries along the east wall (one on top of the other) would more than make up the loss. Ionic columns, some of which were already ordered, would support the lower gallery while the upper one would be upheld



**Section of the North Wing,
Looking North**

by B. Henry Latrobe, 1817

Library of Congress

*A*nticipating a new roster of standing committees, the Senate asked Latrobe to provide more meeting rooms in the north wing. He was able to fit eight rooms into what had been the old library space (left). An enlarged chamber (right) could accommodate a greater number of senators.

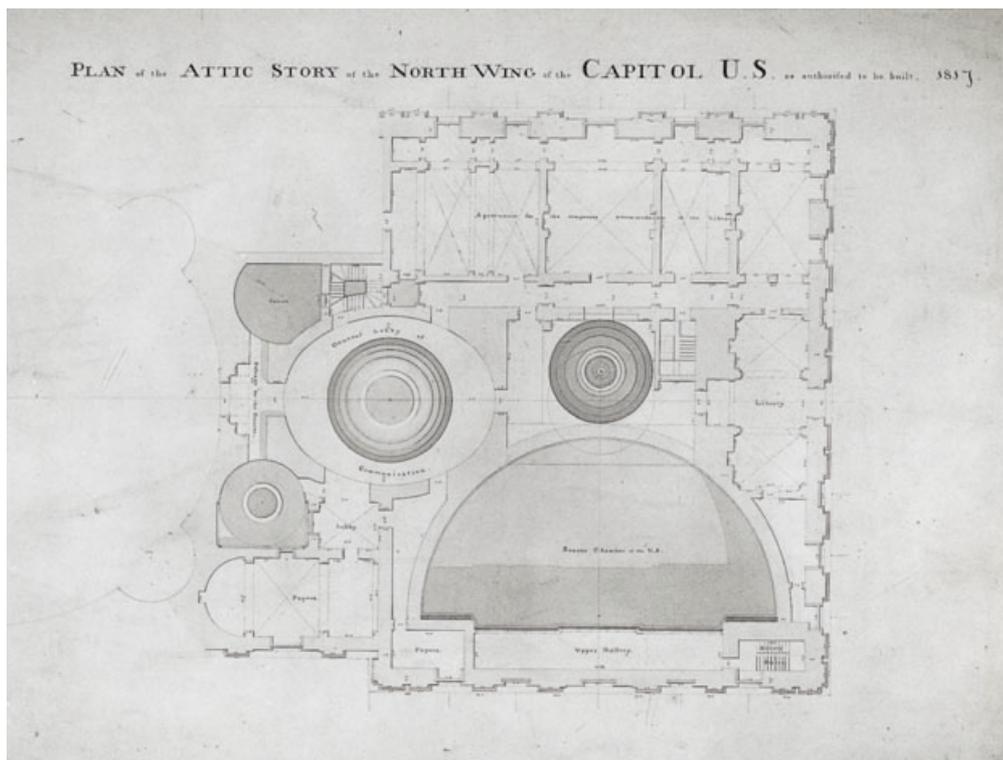
by caryatids. Although his report was silent on what the caryatids would represent, Latrobe later wrote that he intended them to be allegorical representations of the states.

Enlargement of the Senate chamber caused Latrobe one regret. He was proud of the brick dome that had withstood the British attack and needed nothing more than fresh coats of plaster and paint to put it back in first-class condition. To enlarge the room the dome would have to come down and a larger one be built in its place. Latrobe considered the sacrifice worthwhile, however, and, supposing most of the bricks could be cleaned and reused, estimated the new masonry would cost no more than \$3,000.

The Senate appointed a special committee to evaluate Latrobe's proposal and to discuss other ways to improve its accommodation. In making the appointment the Senate sidestepped the commissioners, who were not pleased with this breach of their authority. (They did not complain to the Senate but rather to Latrobe, whom they suspected was party to the snub.) The committee met with Latrobe to give him ideas about the needs of the Senate, its members, officers, and evolving committee system. On March 6, 1816, Latrobe wrote the chairman, Rufus King of New York, saying he had "digested a plan by which your objects will be perfectly accomplished and provisions made for

the Library elsewhere."³⁹ Three weeks later, King asked the architect to report the effect that the change would have on the general expense of the Capitol. Latrobe explained that the plan of the whole building had not yet been approved, but in the case of the Senate wing, the proposed changes would actually decrease the cost of that part of the building.⁴⁰ The crux of Latrobe's plan was to relocate the Library of Congress to the center building and to rebuild its former space into eight committee rooms. Because the library was intended to be a magnificent room with stone columns and extensive galleries, it would be one of the most expensive interiors in the Capitol—but if it were placed in the center building, its cost would not be charged to the north wing.

The need for additional committee rooms was due to the pending formation of the Senate's first roster of standing committees. On December 5, 1816, Senator James Barbour of Virginia introduced a motion to create eleven permanent committees to help modernize the old system of select committees, which were created from time to time to take care of temporary assignments. The new system promised greater continuity and stability in the conduct of the Senate's business.⁴¹ Permanent committees needed accommodations that were private, where they could meet at will, where papers could be securely stored, and where committee members might work.



Plan of the Attic Story of the North Wing of the Capitol U. S. as authorized to be built

by B. Henry Latrobe
Drawn by Frederick C. DeKrafft, 1817

Library of Congress

The rooms along the western side of the north wing's top floor were designed for Senate committees but were labeled here as "Apartments for the temporary accommodation of the Library." In 1815, Thomas Jefferson sold his library of 6,487 volumes to the government for \$23,900 to replace the books lost in the fire.

On April 3 Senator King introduced a resolution approving Latrobe's revised plans for the north wing: it was agreed to two days later. The plans were sent to President Madison, who referred them to the commissioners for approval. The commissioners asked Latrobe if the library could be relocated to the third floor instead of waiting to accommodate it in the center building. Latrobe replied that the Senate had strong objections to sharing its vestibule with the library and the situation would not be improved by moving it upstairs. People going to and from the library would still pass through the lobby in front of the Senate chamber. Climbing an additional flight of stairs would be another source of complaint. However, these rooms could house the library temporarily, "altho' they are low."⁴² The commissioners accepted Latrobe's explanation and approved the revised plan, but regretted it had not been suggested before considerable progress was made in rebuilding the former plan.⁴³

The reconfiguration of the north wing's floor plan occupied so much of Latrobe's time that he neglected (or so the commissioners thought) the south wing. Much of that work hinged upon the selection of material for the columns, and the commissioners were anxious for Latrobe to revisit vari-

ous quarries along the upper Potomac so that a decision might be reached. On February 7, 1816, they reminded him of the necessity of making the trip.⁴⁴ Two weeks later they again implored him to examine the quarries.⁴⁵ Under this pressure and that exerted by Senator King's committee, Latrobe unexpectedly and uncharacteristically advised the commissioners to abandon the idea of marble columns and to use sandstone instead. The commissioners were unhappy with the recommendation, saying that it was their duty not to give up so easily.⁴⁶ They ordered Latrobe to examine "Mr. Clapham's pebble marble in Maryland near Noland's ferry, & the white marble above Harper's ferry." Latrobe scheduled his trip for the first week in March but then wanted to delay it a week because of the pressing business with the Senate. The commissioners denied the request, citing the importance of the journey and said that they would deal with the Senate themselves.⁴⁷

Latrobe finally set out on his journey, arriving at Noland's Ferry on March 13, 1816. With him were a marble mason named John Hartnet and a laborer who carried the tools needed to bore and polish stone. Over the next five or six days they examined the Potomac marble from the "Big springs to the Catoctin mountains" and the "white marble strata from Waterford to its final termination on the river." The party then set out for Harper's Ferry, where limestone deposits containing a variety of marble were said to be located. They examined a marble quarry on the banks of the Monocacy near Woodbury in Frederick County, Maryland, and proceeded to a recently discovered marble deposit four miles inland. The expedition then left for Baltimore to examine the quarries supplying that city. Latrobe stayed there until March 26, taking care of some personal business and allowing his lame horse to rest. He was exhausted by the rigors of the trip, during which he had covered a considerable area of rough terrain on foot and on horseback. While the party was at Harper's Ferry, seven and a half inches of snow fell one night, and it snowed again on the way to Baltimore. He had also suffered a painful fall from his horse.⁴⁸

When Latrobe returned to Washington, he was too unwell to come to the Capitol for a few days. But he immediately reported his findings to the commissioners, who were anxious to settle on a marble for the House chamber. Some of the

marbles examined were exceptionally beautiful, some could be easily quarried, and some were convenient to water transportation, but only one had all three advantages. Latrobe recommended the pebble marble located on Samuel Clapham's land on the banks of the Potomac River. He had tested the stone and thought it would supply all the column shafts needed for the House of Representatives.⁴⁹

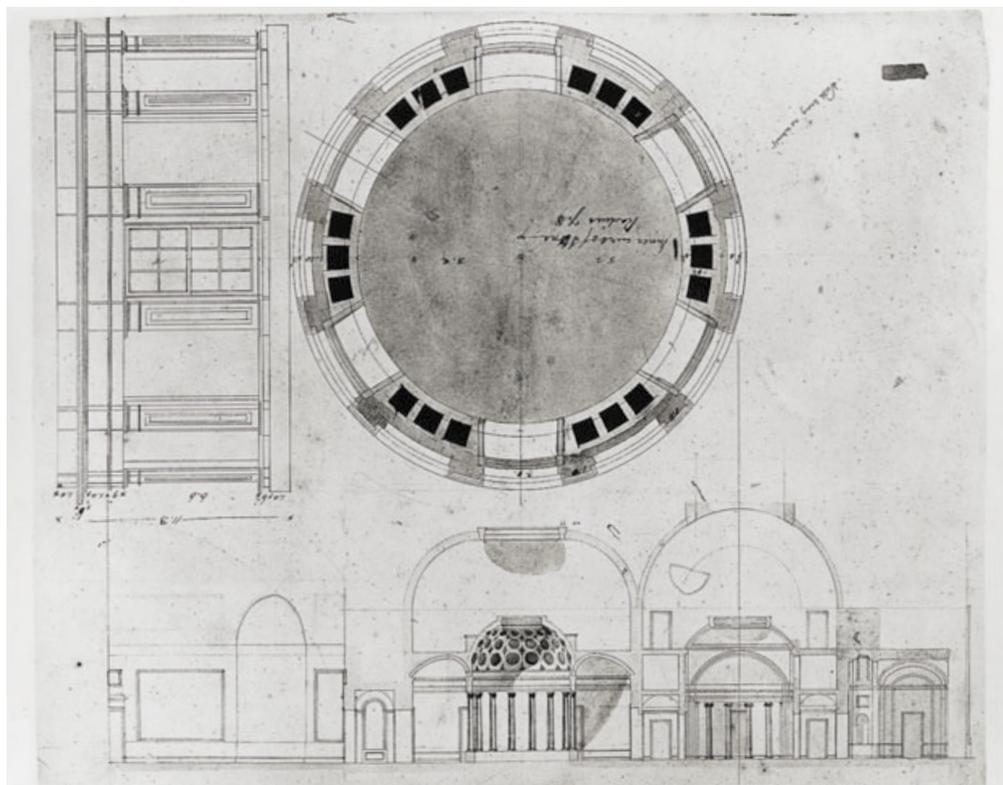
Without a quarry in operation, the commissioners would have to find someone to extract the stone, polish it, and transport it to Washington. Luckily, there was a nearby mill race that could provide power to cut and polish the stone, and the immediate access to the Potomac would simplify transportation to Washington. The owner of the marble was also willing to give it to the government gratuitously.⁵⁰ (He later changed his mind.)

Despite earlier misgivings, Latrobe was now in favor of using the pebble marble instead of free-stone in the House chamber. It was, he said, "acknowledged to be more beautiful than any foreign variegated marble hitherto known," and would be well suited to the marble capitals that were being carved in Italy. It was stronger than sandstone and would better support the brick dome he intended

to build over the chamber. Admittedly, sandstone shafts would be less expensive. Shafts in the former chamber had cost about \$500 each (exclusive of fluting), but now they would cost \$625. According to an offer made by John Hartnet, Potomac marble shafts would cost \$1,550 apiece. Thus, marble for twenty-four shafts would cost \$22,200 more than sandstone. By manipulating the cost of the capitals, however, Latrobe argued that marble columns would actually cost \$16,000 more than sandstone. The difference was therefore trivial.⁵¹

THE COMMISSIONER OF PUBLIC BUILDINGS

*H*artnet's offer to deliver each marble shaft for \$1,550 was, in Latrobe's opinion, an excellent bargain. Comparable shafts at the Union Bank in Baltimore cost \$2,000 apiece, and he was confident no one in Baltimore could beat Hartnet's price.⁵² The commissioners had already made inquiries about the cost of marble columns in other cities,



Details of the Center Building and the North Wing

by B. Henry Latrobe, 1817

Library of Congress

*A*t the lower part of this drawing, Latrobe sketched a section showing the rotunda, the "ornamental air shaft" (called today the "small Senate rotunda"), the Senate vestibule, and a committee room. Except for the latter room, each space was lighted and ventilated from above.

The top part of the drawing illustrates Latrobe's latest plan to gather flues in the central stone lantern to avoid cluttering the roof with chimneys. The idea had been a favorite with him since the Jefferson administration but he was not allowed to proceed until his second campaign.

but before replies were received they discovered that Congress had abolished their office. On April 29, 1816, President Madison approved an appropriation to enclose the Capitol grounds with a fence and authorized alterations to the plans of the north and south wings.⁵³ The legislation also abolished the three-man board as well as the office of the superintendent of the city, which had been occupied by Thomas Munroe since 1802. The duties were combined into the new, one-man office called the “commissioner of public buildings.” The salary was \$2,000 a year.

The change of authority was a mixed blessing for Latrobe. While the legislation was still before the Senate, he wrote Madison asking to be named commissioner.⁵⁴ He complained that the board had treated him in the most “coarse and offensive” manner. They constantly reminded him that there were other architects ready to take his place. The commissioners were a condescending lot who told Latrobe that pity for his family was the principal reason they kept him on. Contracts were made and workmen dismissed without his knowledge, and their ignorance had cost the public dearly. He recalled his relations with Jefferson, which illustrated the necessity of having direct access to the president without meddling middlemen. The new arrangement offered little hope for improvement but he had to endure because he was too poor to quit.

The letter did not convince the president to make the appointment Latrobe hoped for. Instead Madison nominated John Van Ness on April 29; however, he was rejected by the Senate the following day. The president intended next to nominate Richard Bland Lee but learned that the Senate would not confirm any of the former commissioners to the new post. Samuel Lane, an old friend of Secretary of State James Monroe, was nominated instead. Lane was a wounded veteran of the last war who was first considered for the post of claims commissioner to pay for property destroyed, lost, or captured by the enemy—what Latrobe called the “Commissioner of Dead Horses.”⁵⁵ Considering the politics of the situation, Madison switched the appointments and nominated Richard Bland Lee claims commissioner and Samuel Lane commissioner of public buildings. The Senate confirmed Lane on April 30, 1816.

Latrobe was delighted that Congress had abolished the old board, “the most villainous board of Commissioners that ever had the power of tormenting in their heads.” He was also happy the Senate rejected Van Ness, whom he characterized as an “insolent brute.”⁵⁶ He looked forward to meeting the new commissioner, “a disbanded Officer, with one arm useless, and a ball thro’ the thigh,” but felt his subordination to a nonprofessional man would cause trouble in the future.⁵⁷ His fears, as it turned out, were fully justified.

In military fashion Lane demanded regular reports. He had forms printed to report the number of workmen at the Capitol, what tasks they performed, and what salaries they were being paid. On May 29, 1816, the clerk of the works, Shadrach Davis, reported that (not counting foremen) ten carpenters were making centers for vaults and arches, twenty-nine men were cutting stone, five men were laying brick in the north wing, and twenty-eight laborers were “attending.”⁵⁸ Three sculptors were on the payroll, engaged in repairing the exterior carvings and making the entablature for the hall of the House. Two American carvers, named McIntosh and Henderson, were joined in 1816 by a talented Italian sculptor whose brief career had a lasting impact on the Capitol. Carlo Franzoni, younger brother of Giuseppe, was recruited at the commissioner’s request by Richard McCall.⁵⁹ Other Italian sculptors, including Antonio Capellano, Francisco Iardella, and Giuseppe Valaperti, were also employed in the restoration of the Capitol.

Lane was a stern task master. Latrobe thought that although he was not a bad man he was entirely unfit for his place.⁶⁰ After returning from a trip to Baltimore where private business detained him for several days, Latrobe received a letter from Lane scolding him for allowing work to suffer for want of attention. A new master mason named John Queen started laying brick in Latrobe’s absence, which Lane thought was just the time he should be watching closely. Latrobe’s hours were only from 10 o’clock in the morning until three o’clock in the afternoon, which left enough time for other business and gave Lane the right to expect the architect to be “punctual and regular.”⁶¹ While testy, Lane’s letter was hardly impolite, yet Latrobe took offense. He returned it with a note that said: “The enclosed has been sent by mistake to my

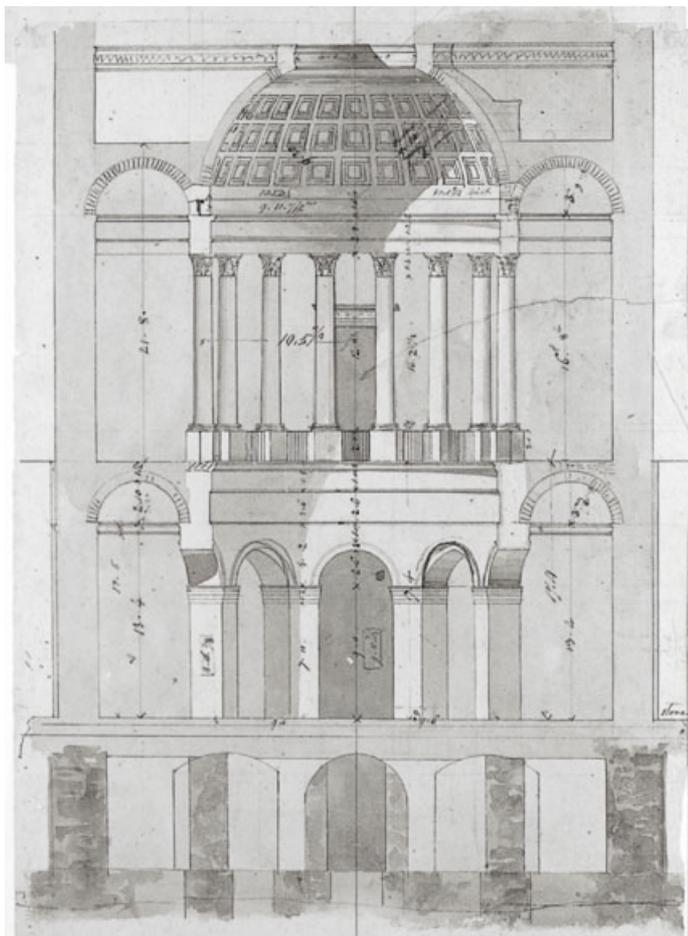
address: that it was apparently intended for somebody who was supposed to have neither the habits, the education, nor the *spirit* of a Gentleman.”⁶² Lane’s reaction can only be imagined, but the episode did nothing to promote harmony at the Capitol.

Another letter Latrobe received about this time was most welcome. Thomas Jefferson wrote an account of a sundial he mounted on the “corn cob” capital that Latrobe sent to Monticello in 1809. Latrobe responded to this friendly letter with news that the corn columns were barely injured by the British and he wished to leave them alone.⁶³ But some things in the north wing would be changed, including the location and design of the principal staircase. The former staircase had survived but was damaged when the lantern above it crashed down and broke some of the stones. In rebuilding, Latrobe relocated the stair just off the east lobby and designed it to be “less curious.” In its former location a vestibule was being built with a circular

colonnade supporting a dome with an oculus to admit light and air. Here, the capitals were designed with tobacco leaves and flowers—Latrobe’s third exercise in Americanizing the classical orders. Iardella made a plaster model of the tobacco capital, which Latrobe promised to send to Monticello after the carvers were done with it.

Work done during the 1816 building season disappointed members of the House and Senate upon their return to Washington for the opening of the second session of the 14th Congress in December. Latrobe’s annual report stated that nothing could be done inside the south wing until the columns were delivered, but he assured members of Congress that the beauty of the marble made the wait worthwhile. Only one pilaster was ready to be sent and it would be some time before all the column shafts were delivered and ready to put up. In the meantime, 106 blocks of sandstone had been carved for the entablature—about a third of what would be required—and all the stone for the gallery front was ready to set.⁶⁴

Progress was more apparent in the north wing. The columns and vaults in the Supreme Court chamber had survived the fire but were greatly weakened and had to be removed. A new vault was



Tobacco Capital

Sixteen columns in the small Senate rotunda were designed with tobacco capitals, another case of Latrobe’s assured and original adaptation of native plants to classical usage. The capital was modeled by Francisco Iardella in 1816. Latrobe admired his faithfulness to the botanical character of the tobacco plant. (1961 photograph.)

Preliminary Design for the Small Senate Rotunda

by B. Henry Latrobe, ca. 1816

Library of Congress

While repairs to the north wing were under way, Latrobe built a domed air shaft where a stair had formerly been located. The oculus of the dome provided an unexpected and welcome source of light and air.

Supreme Court Chamber

*T*here are no known views of this chamber drawn during the half-century the Supreme Court met here (1810–1860). Perhaps artists were daunted by the unusual architectural setting, or perhaps the Court simply discouraged such endeavors. (1975 photograph.)



built along the lines of the old one but no columns were used along the semicircular arcade. Instead, the arcade was built with stout piers, and columns were used only to support the three-bay arcade along the eastern wall. In the Senate chamber upstairs, the fire had destroyed everything that was marble or sandstone, but the great brick dome survived. The enlargement of the room meant that it too was removed. Latrobe reported that ten feet of the new semicircular wall was in place. The new plan also required removal of the vaults over the first-floor rooms in the western half of the north wing in order to raise them to the proper level. (Had it been built, the floor of the Egyptian library would have been five feet lower than the general second-floor level.) New vaults for three stories of committee rooms in this section were completed during the 1816 building season.

As members of the House of Representatives could plainly see, repairs to the Senate wing were

proceeding apace while nothing was being done in the south wing. The chairman of the Committee on Expenditures on Public Buildings, Lewis Condict of New Jersey, asked the commissioner to provide an account of the monies spent to repair the Capitol and to explain why work on the south wing was at a standstill. Lane reported that from April 30, 1815, to January 1, 1817, \$76,000 had been spent on the Capitol—about \$40,000 for materials, \$31,000 for labor, and \$5,000 for incidentals such as freight, wharfage, and tools.⁶⁵ Construction of the House chamber depended on delivery of the marble columns to support the ceiling and roof structure and without them nothing could be done. It was not only the pebble marble that was slow in coming: the Italian marble capitals that were supposed to be shipped in the spring of 1816 had not been received either. The cause for the delay was unknown: Andrei had not been heard from. Lane quickly pointed out that the delay could not be

blamed on him because the order for Italian capitals had been made by his predecessors.⁶⁶

Condict and his committee also wanted an estimate of the cost to complete the wings. Latrobe reported that the probable expense of finishing the north wing was \$108,000 and \$126,500 would be needed for the south wing.⁶⁷ The figures were given without an explanation of how they were calculated or broken down into labor and material categories. Latrobe wrote the commissioner a letter explaining the difficulty of compiling estimates on short notice when the plans for the wings had been altered and there were not sufficient drawings from which to make calculations. Lane forwarded Latrobe's numbers to Condict without explanation, leaving the architect exposed to the committee's censure. Condict's committee said the estimates were "deficient in point of detail, and by no means satisfactory to the committee."⁶⁸ On February 22, 1817, Latrobe wrote a memorial to the House of Representatives explaining why his estimates were so terse and expressed his "utter surprise and mortification" that they were sent without the explanatory letter.⁶⁹ He did not show the memorial to Lane, accusing him instead of deliberately trying to embarrass him. "Under such circumstances of official hostility," Latrobe wrote, "I could only appeal to the Legislature in explanation, which I have done."⁷⁰

TROUBLE IN THE "ERA OF GOOD FEELINGS"

*W*ith the close of the 14th Congress came the end of James Madison's presidency. He attended the inauguration of his successor, James Monroe, which was held in front of the "Brick Capitol," and returned to his Virginia estate to begin a long, quiet retirement. In contrast to his earlier career, Madison's two terms as president were only marginally successful, clouded by diplomatic blunders, a mismanaged war, the humiliating fall of the capital, and his own embarrassing flight just ahead of British troops. He took no interest in the work to repair the public buildings, shielding himself with inept commissioners. Latrobe longed for the days of frequent and friendly counsels with Thomas Jef-

erson, which were intellectually invigorating, occasionally frustrating, but always cordial. In Jefferson's administration, he had held a position of trust and was a complete master of his works. With Madison, a man never known for warmth, the best Latrobe could hope for was icy indifference and frustrating deferrals to the citizen commissioners. Monroe's assent to the presidency could only improve his situation, or so Latrobe thought.

Monroe was no stranger to Washington, having served the previous administration as secretary of state and, after the city's capture, secretary of war as well. He did not think the repairs to the Capitol and President's House were proceeding as quickly as they might, and he became determined to expedite matters. Monroe had every intention of pushing the works forward and becoming more involved than his predecessor. To advise him on ways to speed things along, he appointed an informal board consisting of Lieutenant Colonel George Bomford of the Army Ordinance Department and General Joseph Swift of the Army Corps of Engineers. Latrobe thought they would make all the important decisions while the commissioner would merely carry out their orders.⁷¹ Mistakenly, the architect believed that Lane's behavior had discredited him and that the new council was created to sidestep his authority. Instead, Monroe merely wanted to consult with men who knew about construction and procurement and, as army officers, appreciated economy and efficiency.

In office less than a month, Monroe began deciding issues regarding the Capitol based largely on expediency. It became clear that the overriding consideration in his mind was speed. The first question Monroe decided was which material to use for the ceilings over the House and Senate chambers. Latrobe planned to build both semicircular domes with brick and cover them with plaster. Masonry domes would be permanent, fireproof, and worthy of the beautiful marble columns that were destined for these rooms. Monroe put the question of masonry domes to Bomford and Swift, who reported their thoughts on March 19, 1817. They did not doubt that brick domes could be built, but did not consider the time and money worthwhile. Timber ceilings would last fifty years and would help calm the public's fears regarding the danger of falling masonry vaults.⁷²

Framing Details of the Senate Ceiling
 by B. Henry Latrobe, 1817
 Library of Congress

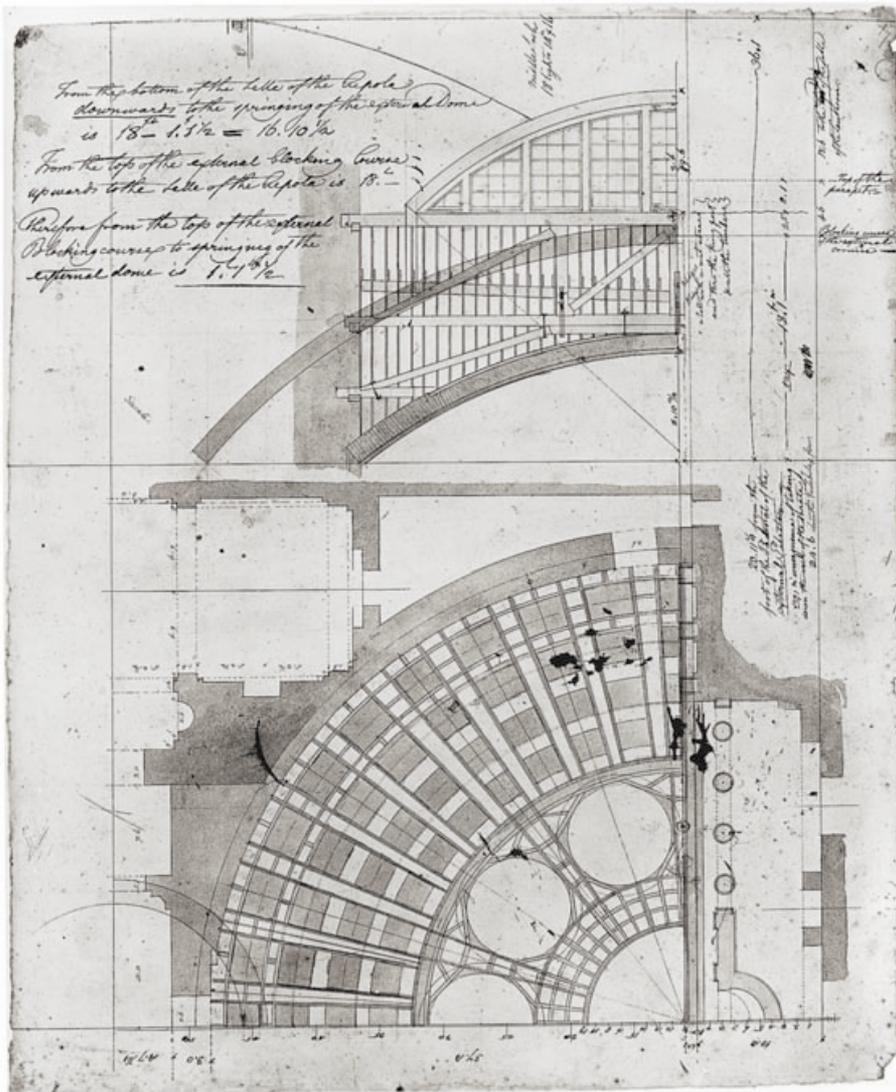
Against his objections, Latrobe was ordered to build timber-framed ceilings over the chambers. These were neither permanent nor fireproof and, in the architect's opinion, were unworthy of the magnificent rooms they would cover. Yet, as this drawing illustrates, framing such a ceiling was no simple matter. It required the skill of an engineer and the experience of a master carpenter.

Heeding expert advice, Monroe ordered the chambers covered with wooden domes. On April 2, 1817, Lane informed Latrobe of the president's decision, and he immediately reacted with a bitter letter of protest.⁷³ The matter was of great importance and he hoped it would not be necessary to act contrary to his judgment and experience. It was particularly important that the ceiling over the Senate chamber be made of brick so it could help support the stone lantern intended for the center of the roof. Latrobe proposed to gather many of the wing's chimney flues in the lantern in order to preserve the symmetry of the roof line.

George Blagden, like Bomford and Swift, also favored wooden domes and helped the president make up his mind on the issue. Coming from the

most experienced and trustworthy mason in the city, Blagden's advice carried at least as much weight as Latrobe's, and his reputation as a practical man placed him higher in many minds. Blagden offered his opinion on brick domes in a long letter written on March 14, 1817.⁷⁴ He entered the subject gingerly, saying: "From my youth I was taught to look up to the character of an architect, as a workman however, and one that has grown grey in the service, I give you my opinion freely." It was clear that he had little taste for Latrobe's heavy vaults and other things he considered extravagant. Blagden thought the form of the House chamber was changed to a semicircle so that it could be "arched," and he asked himself if such an arch could stand. To this question he replied: "I think not, first because of the work beneath, if conjoined to the load of the columns and entablature, 'tis enough the arches of the Basement story must ever groan . . . why run this risk, why give an additional weight of nearly five hundred tons to these arches." He was reminded of the dangerous consequences of extensive arches and vaults, which the architect knew from "terrible experience." The east wall of the Senate chamber was forced out almost four inches from the pressure of the interior vaulting. Even the relatively small arches over the gallery in the former House chamber pushed the walls out of plumb. Blagden thought it best to abandon the idea of a domed House chamber, suggesting instead to suspend a flat ceiling from roof trusses. He would also abandon the circular colonnade and bring the galleries out four feet to give more space to the committee rooms underneath, thereby making them more useful. Moving to the north wing, Blagden observed that the span of the proposed vault over the Senate chamber posed the same dangers that threatened the House. He dreaded Latrobe's extravagance in both the extent of the vaulting and the expense of using costly materials. Particularly bothersome was Latrobe's design for the Senate galleries, with marble columns holding a row of marble caryatids, that Blagden thought wildly and excessively expensive.

Blagden's letter dealt the fatal blow to Latrobe's plans for brick domes and emblematic caryatids for the Senate gallery. A few days after the letter was written, the commissioner asked Latrobe about what was needed "to supply the place of the caryatids formerly proposed for the Senate chamber."⁷⁵

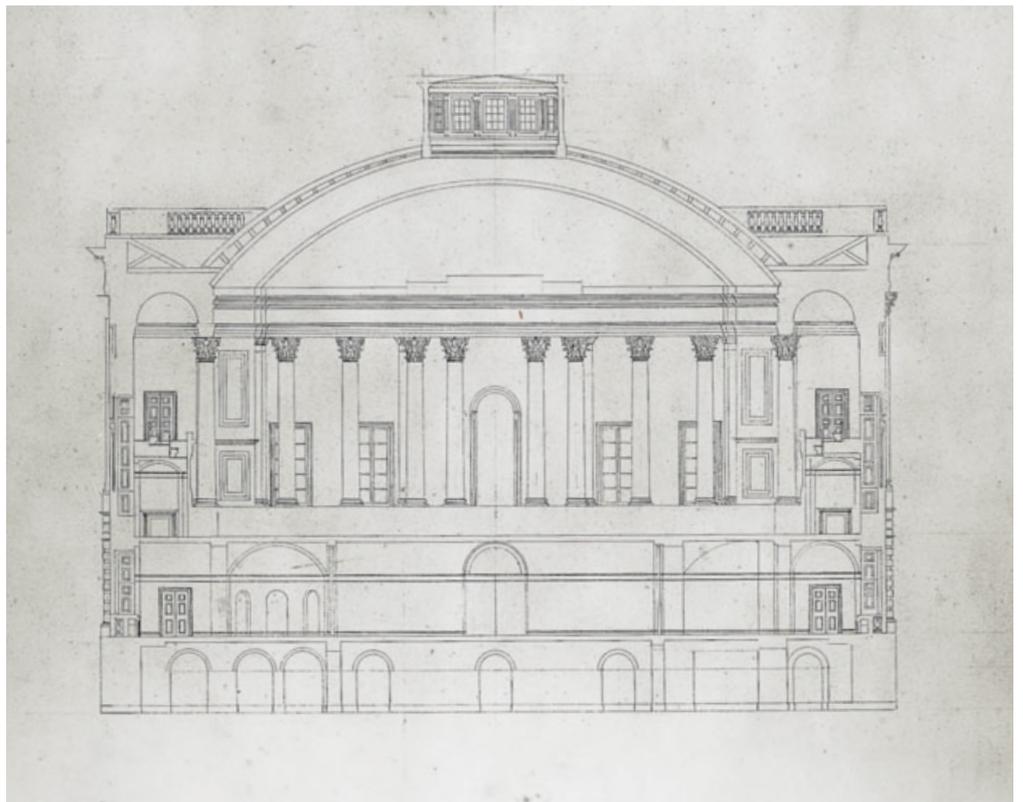


Latrobe suggested using a row of dwarf columns of variegated marble. Although he did not tell Lane, he intended to retain six caryatids in the corner piers, but these too would eventually drop from the room's final design.⁷⁶

Latrobe was genuinely upset by the president's decision to build wooden domes. He reacted by saying that he could not devise a plan or method of framing these ceilings but would attempt to build them if plans could be obtained from another source. Perhaps it would be best, Latrobe told the commissioner, for him to resign, as "the Public could do very well without him."⁷⁷ In a short time, however, he swallowed his pride and submitted an estimate of the lumber necessary to build the dome over the House chamber and the roof over the south wing.⁷⁸ The domes and roofs for both wings would be framed on the ground, disassembled, and reassembled in place. The commissioner first thought the ground west of the Capitol was the best place to frame the domes, but Latrobe objected because it would be too far from the lumber yard (presumably on the east grounds), and it would interfere with masons making mortar near the pump located between the wings.⁷⁹ Who won the argument is not known, but it seemed that the architect and the commissioner could not agree on any issue, large or small.

THE MAJESTY OF MARBLE

The 1817 building season was Latrobe's last at the Capitol. It was a stressful time, with the commissioner applying pressure to speed construction and the president demanding heroic exertions from all concerned. Because most of the old drawings were rendered useless by the changes to the design of the wings, Latrobe worried that he could not produce new drawings fast enough to keep up with demand. The president allowed him to hire two draftsmen to help. William Small, son of Latrobe's friend Jacob Small of Baltimore, was employed full time at \$750 a year. It was the same salary he had earned assisting his father and directing carpenters building the Baltimore Exchange, one of Latrobe's largest outside jobs. A draftsman from the city surveyor's



Section of the South Wing, Looking South

by B. Henry Latrobe

Drawn by John H. B. Latrobe, 1817

Library of Congress

*L*atrobe's son drew this section showing the House chamber covered with a wooden dome, a construction shortcut ordered by President Monroe over the architect's strenuous objections. The smooth wooden ceiling promoted echoes that plagued the room from the beginning.

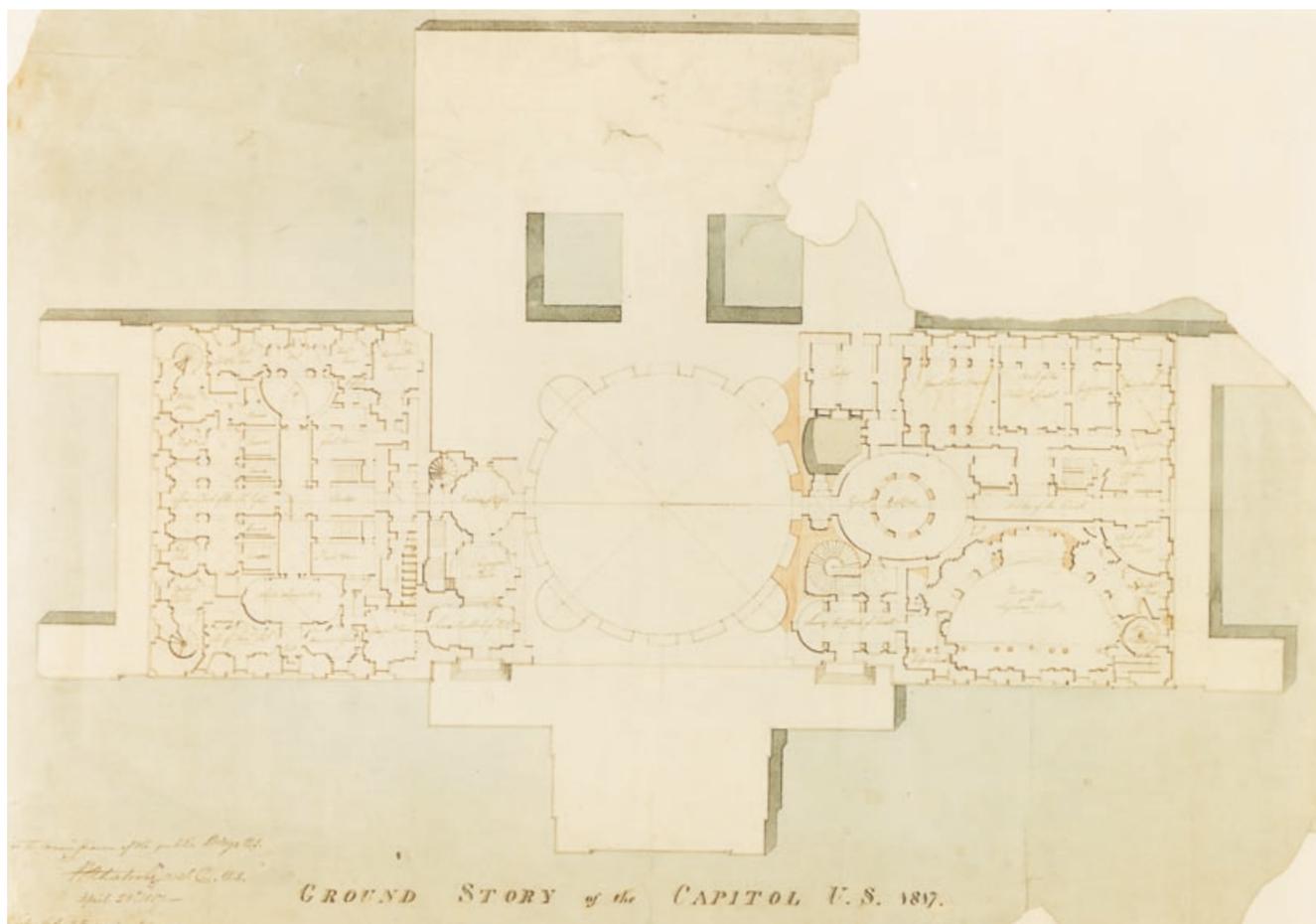
office, William Blanchard, was hired part time at \$350 a year. With these men, Latrobe was able to hand over original drawings to be copied, either for explanatory purposes or to be used (and used up) by workmen.⁸⁰

Some thought that slow delivery of Potomac marble would delay restoration of the wings for many more years. Lane wanted to abandon the marble altogether and use sandstone columns. To decide the case, President Monroe went to Noland's Ferry on March 28, 1817, personally inspected the stone, and became convinced that its beauty was worth the trouble and time it would take to deliver it to Washington. But the master of the works, John Hartnet, found it beyond his means to quarry and

Ground Story of the Capitol U. S.

by B. Henry Latrobe
Drawn by
William Blanchard, 1817
Library of Congress

This plan illustrated only those parts of the Capitol undergoing repair. The plan of the south wing remained virtually unchanged from its pre-fire configuration, while the north wing plan reflects changes brought about with Latrobe's post-fire adjustments. In that wing, only the east vestibule with its corn columns was left exactly as it had been from the pre-fire period. With the plan still undecided, the entire center building was left blank.

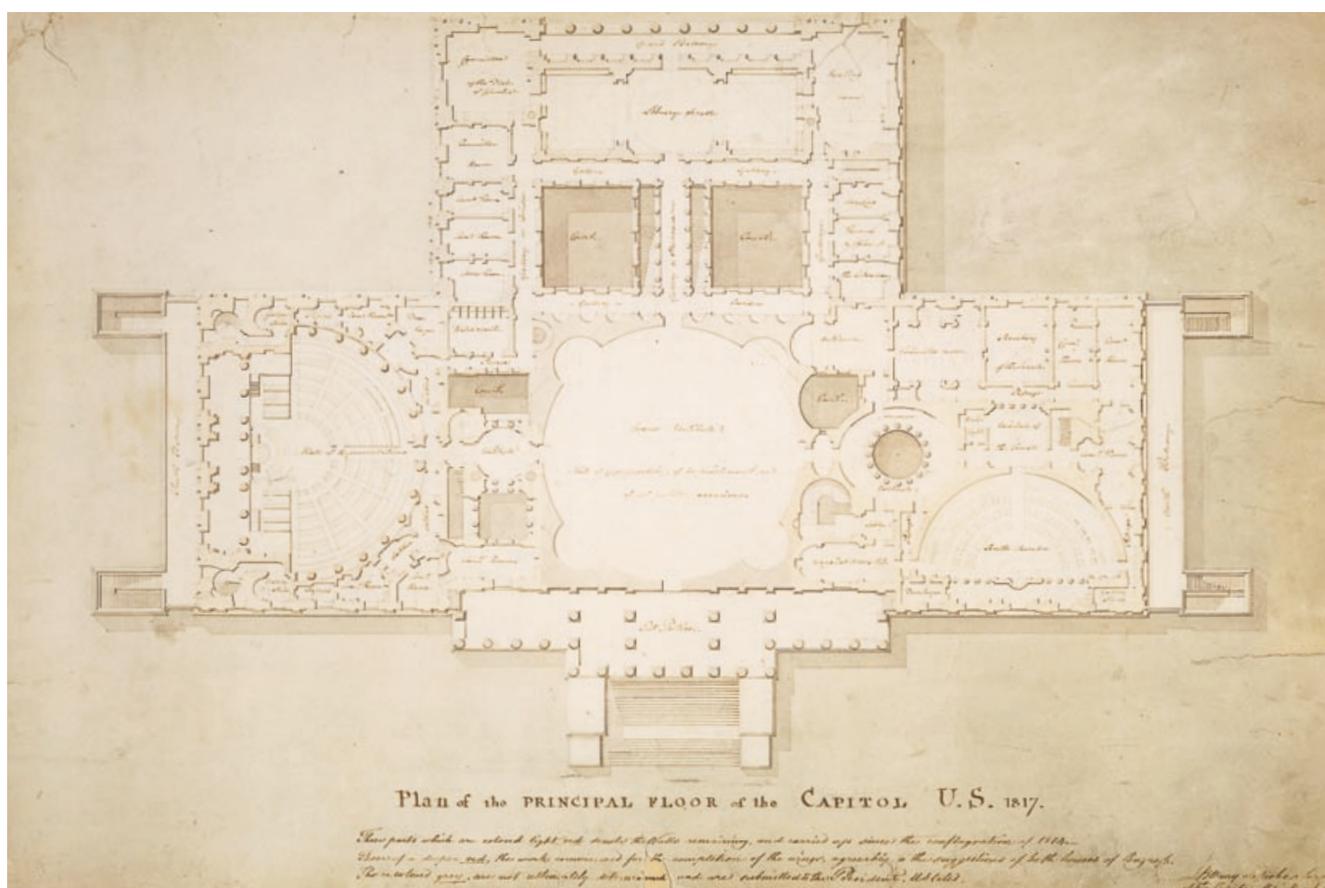


Plan of the Principal Floor of the Capitol U. S.

by B. Henry Latrobe
Drawn by
William Blanchard, 1817
Library of Congress

Prepared for President Monroe, this plan shows the wings under repair and a proposed plan for the center building. For the western projection, Latrobe proposed a large, three-part room for the Library of Congress that would be lighted from above. Reading rooms, committee rooms, stairs, and two rooms for the librarian were provided nearby.

The rotunda was labeled: "Grand Vestibule. Hall of inauguration, of impeachment, and of all public occasions."



polish the pebble marble with anything approaching the speed the president wanted. Monroe detailed Robert Leckie, “the conductor of all the Arsenals U. S. and a famous Quarrier,” to assist in the effort.⁸¹ After Monroe instructed the commissioner to divide the work into two parts, Leckie was placed in charge of getting the stone from the quarry and Hartnet was made responsible for shaping it. A clerk was hired to keep accounts, pay workmen, and take care of provisions. To keep the pressure up, the president wanted to see concise reports every Monday morning.⁸²

Latrobe wrote Jefferson that he had nine blocks of what he now called “Columbian marble” that would “render our public buildings rich in native magnificence.”⁸³ While its beauty was undeniable, Latrobe suggested that the stone was more generally admired because it was American. The sentiment was echoed in *Niles’ Weekly Register*, when it praised Latrobe for using the “internal riches of our country” for the Capitol’s embellishment.⁸⁴

While Potomac marble supplied column shafts, and Italian marble would be used for most capitals, other marbles were employed for bases, entablatures, stairs, and statuary. Latrobe wanted to use white marble from Baltimore for the main staircase in the north wing. It was harder and cheaper than Philadelphia marble and was much more suitable for stairs than the sandstone used previously.⁸⁵ On August 13, 1817, Lane agreed to pay Thomas Towson \$1,200 for steps and landings and asked him to complete the order as soon as possible. The commissioner thought Towson’s price was high and asked if a discount would be considered in return for prompt payment.⁸⁶ Once the marble was delivered to Washington, it was turned over to Blagden and his stone cutting department. He predicted that the marble could be boasted, molded, polished, and installed in about seven weeks.⁸⁷ For the dwarf columns in the Senate chamber, Latrobe wanted to use veined marble from Thomas Traquair’s stone yard in Philadelphia. Traquair offered to furnish the short column shafts for ninety dollars each, a price Lane again thought too high. He wanted to pay five dollars less and hoped Traquair would agree. Lane also wanted to buy bases and cinctures for the columns in the House chamber from Traquair, who offered to deliver the bases for \$200 apiece and the cinctures for forty dollars. Lane countered with an offer of

\$200 for both.⁸⁸ But Traquair would not budge and Lane was obliged to pay the asking prices.⁸⁹ Time was running out and Traquair could deliver the stone promptly. Lane enlisted the help of a prominent architect from New York, John McComb, to secure white marble bases and entablature for the Senate colonnade. These were sent to Washington in mid-June 1817.⁹⁰ Carvers finished the Philadelphia and New York marble after it was received at the Capitol.

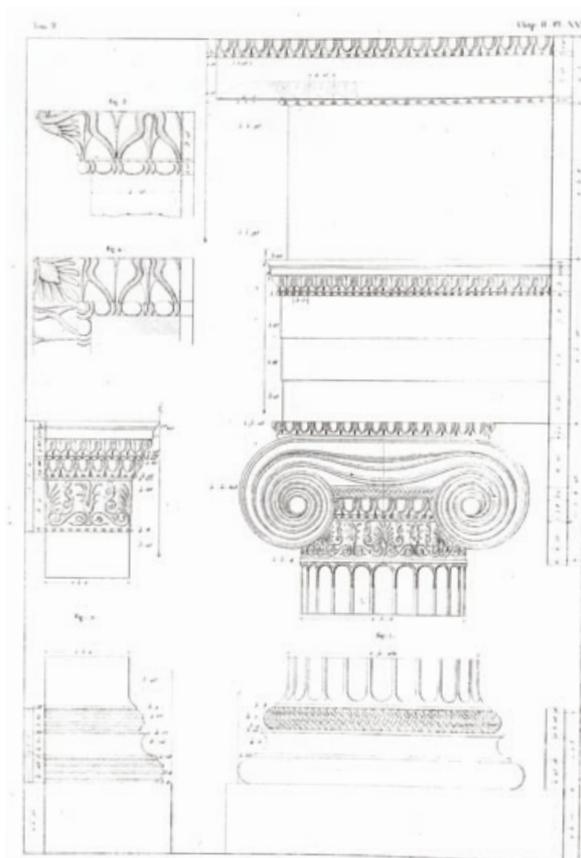
A cargo of beautifully carved white marble capitals accompanied Andrei upon his return to Washington in June 1817. He had fulfilled his mission admirably and, although he returned more than a year late, his time in Italy had not delayed construction. During his absence the plans for the Senate chamber were changed. Instead of four columns and two pilasters, the revised design called for eight columns in the chamber and four more in the lobby plus dwarf columns, antae, and pilasters. Apparently Latrobe or Lane wrote Andrei about the additional capitals that were needed. He procured eight additional capitals in Italy but the less intricate caps for antae and pilasters were carved in Washington. Luckily, there were four blocks of Italian marble on hand that Latrobe intended to use for these capitals as well as for the doorframe around the entrance to the House chamber. What remained could be used for statuary. He was horrified to learn that Blagden had other plans for the stones, including cutting them up into hearths for the President’s House, and immediately sent a letter of protest to Lane, who put a stop to Blagden’s scheme.⁹¹ Five carvers worked on the antae and pilaster capitals for the Senate chamber and lobby, copying as best they could the exquisite models from Italy. Andrei carved the capitals of the dwarf columns in place just as he had done years ago for the columns in the former House chamber.⁹²

The best of the sculptors, Carlo Franzoni, was engaged in 1817 on two allegorical groups: a figure of Justice for the Supreme Court and the *Car of History* for the hall of the House. The first was a reproduction of the destroyed sculpture by his brother Giuseppe. The *Car of History* was substituted for the four allegorical figures over the principal entrance to the old House chamber. The new work was “a figure of history in a winged Car, the wheel of which forms the face of the Clock or time piece.”⁹³ Only the *Car of History*, one of America’s

Ionic Order of the Erechtheion, Athens

From the 1825 edition of *The Antiquities of Athens* by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett

Many connoisseurs consider this the most beautiful specimen of the Ionic order. Latrobe specified it for the Senate chamber and vestibule, omitting some of the carved ornaments and erecting the shafts without flutes.



House Chamber Details

by B. Henry Latrobe
1815

Library of Congress

Latrobe's preliminary sketch for the *Car of History* appears in the center of this drawing of the principal entrance to the House chamber.



foremost neoclassical sculptures, was translated into marble. The Justice figure was never carved in marble due to the lack of materials. Latrobe also planned additional sculpture, including an eagle for the frieze in the hall of the House to replace the one destroyed by the British. Carved by Giuseppe Valaperti, it formed a part of the sandstone entablature. Above the eagle was a figure of Liberty holding the constitution in one hand. An eagle and a serpent, symbolizing America and wisdom, flank the central figure. The grouping recalled a similar work of art that was admired in the former hall, except that this figure of Liberty was standing rather than seated. Enrico Causici sculpted the plaster models that, like Franzoni's figure of Justice, were never carved in marble.

On the outside of the building, Latrobe planned to incorporate sculpture into the attic panels located in the center of the south end of the House wing and the north end of the Senate wing. A "phoenix rising from burning ruins" was intended for one while "the last Military Achievement of the War" was proposed for the other.⁹⁴ Thus an allegory of the destruction and restoration of the Capitol would be seen on one end of the building and a commemorative representation of the Battle of New Orleans would be on the other. By the time the panels were completed by Latrobe's successor, however, the sculptural enrichments were greatly simplified.

Commissioner Lane, seemingly without Latrobe's knowledge or advice, sought out marble mantels in Philadelphia, New York, and Italy. He wrote his agent in Philadelphia about mantels and other matters related to marble. Ready-made mantels were available and the price depended only on the marble selected. Lane received drawings of various designs with a key to explain the kinds of marble available.⁹⁵ Lane also asked John McComb about mantels available in New York City and was shocked by the prices they commanded: \$300 to \$450 for plain mantels, and \$600 for those with sculptural enrichments.⁹⁶ It would be cheaper, Lane concluded, to obtain them from Italy. Lane sent an order to a London firm for mantels, hearths, and paving tiles made from Italian marble. Purviance, Nicholas & Company was asked to ensure that the materials were genuine and the workmanship excellent, as the American public wished to have its money's worth.⁹⁷



Car of History

by Carlo Franzoni, ca. 1819

Clio, the muse of history, watches the House of Representatives over its members' shoulders, while billowing drapery suggests movement and the passage of time. Her winged chariot is carved with a bas relief portrait of George Washington accompanied by a figure of Fame blowing a horn. Simon Willard, the famous Boston clock maker, provided the workings for the time piece housed in the chariot's wheel. (1971 photograph.)

LATROBE'S FINAL DAYS

In the summer of 1817, President Monroe embarked on a three-month tour of New England, traveling to the very core of Federalist strength. The so-called "Era of Good Feelings" marked a lull in party differences, and for a short time the nation thrived without political factions. Before he left, Monroe made it clear that he wanted the public buildings finished by the time he returned to Washington. Everything was in place, everyone knew his duty, there was money enough, and Monroe had no intention of remaining in rented quarters or denying Congress the use of the Capitol any longer than necessary. The president threatened to dismiss Latrobe or Lane if they did not proceed with greater harmony and expedite the completion of the Capitol.⁹⁸ The old colonel was determined not to disappoint the president while the architect seemed less concerned about matters beyond his control.

The chambers remained unfinished and little could be done until the marble was delivered. The first floor of the south wing had been restored and was occupied by a few workmen as their temporary residence. Three floors of offices and committee rooms on the west side of the north wing (the former Library of Congress space) were vaulted and the curving wall in the Senate was nearly completed. But when Monroe returned to Washington in September he was greeted by two wings that were still far from finished. Unavoidable setbacks, such as the collapse of a lock on the Chesapeake and Ohio canal in July that interrupted marble delivery, meant little to the president. He wanted results, not excuses.

Latrobe thought that some unknown adviser had tricked the president into thinking the restoration of the wings could be finished in three months. He was not surprised when Monroe appointed yet another commission to look into the management of the works, but regretted that it would isolate him further from the president. In a letter to John Trumbull, Latrobe recounted the president's actions upon returning from his gratifying trip to New England:

On his arrival, the President, misled by I don't know who, expected the Capitol to be finished; of course he was disappointed, and in his first emotions would have ordered my dismissal, had he not been prevented by some very disinterested friends. He however appointed Genl. Mason, [Colo]nel Bomford, and Mr. Geo. Graham, a com[mission] of enquiry into the conduct at the Capitol. These are honorable and good Men. But what a system is that, which shutting out from the President all direct and professional information, interposes that of men, whom neither leisure nor knowledge of the subject qualifies to give it, or explain the

difficulties, or remove the misrepresentatives of ignorance or Malice. And under such a system it is expected that Genius shall freely act, and display itself?⁹⁹

The popular wisdom around Washington blamed the pace of work at the Capitol on Latrobe's absences from the city. His work on the Exchange and Cathedral in Baltimore took him out of town regularly, and it seemed obvious that the Capitol suffered accordingly. It was rumored that Latrobe would go to Baltimore and stay three weeks at a time. To defend himself, Latrobe wrote the president an account of his absences.¹⁰⁰ Since moving back to Washington, he had never left the city unless to go to the marble quarries or to Baltimore. In all, he had missed only thirty-seven and a half days of work over the last twenty-nine months but was sometimes detained because of unforeseen sickness or family distress. He did not feel the journeys affected the Capitol in the least, but he could not prevent the public perception of neglect.

The commissioner wrote foremen about the state of affairs in their departments while Latrobe was asked to compile answers to a long series of questions posed by the latest advisory board.¹⁰¹ Were there enough workmen? Was all the lumber bought for doors and windows? Did he have enough bricks, lime, and sand to complete the brickwork? When would the roof be ready? How many blocks of pebble marble were at the Capitol and how many were ready to be sent from the quarry? How much sandstone would be needed to complete the entablature in the House chamber? Question after question was asked, most of which Latrobe or the foremen had answered before, but there was now another set of "experts" to educate.

Shadrach Davis, Latrobe's plodding yet dependable clerk of the works, reported to Lane the number of workmen employed at the Capitol for the week ending October 27, 1817.¹⁰² There were twenty-three stone cutters working on both wings, twenty marble cutters and nine polishers working on the columns for the House chamber, twelve sculptors and carvers working on ornaments, eighteen bricklayers working on the north wing, and forty carpenters building the dome over the north wing and making centers for arches and vaults. One hundred and thirty-five laborers, many of whom were slaves, brought the total number of workmen at the Capitol to 257. By contrast,

Davis' first report five months earlier showed only eighty-two workers and illustrated the effects of Monroe's push to accelerate construction.

A day or two after Davis wrote the report, he was fired by the commissioner. Latrobe was enraged by this breach of his professional prerogative and accused Lane of lording his power over the workmen while denying the architect his rights. Latrobe liked Davis and was sorry he was mistreated by the commissioner. He suspected the foreman of carpenters, Leonard Harbaugh, was behind all this. Harbaugh and Davis had never gotten along, and Lane tended to trust the master carpenter's opinion because he respected his industry and attention to duty. When Lane would show up at the Capitol at daybreak, Harbaugh was there. Members of Congress were politely escorted around the works by Harbaugh, who courted their favor. Davis, on the other hand, was gruff and slow but was "a capital Ship joiner," which prepared him well for building the curving centers for Latrobe's complicated vaults.¹⁰³

Lane replaced Davis with Peter Lenox, who had been the foreman of carpenters under Hoban at the President's House. Although still unfinished, the residence was sufficiently habitable for the Monroes to move in during the month of October. Diligent workmen such as Lenox could help speed restoration of the Capitol, and Latrobe's feelings or opinions were of no concern to the commissioner. Lenox was an excellent carpenter who had helped build the "oven" in 1801. He had also worked under John Lenthall, but Latrobe thought he was something of a showoff. Latrobe preferred Davis's quiet, methodical ways, and following his dismissal, a protest letter was written by the architect on October 29, 1817. Two days later the commissioner shot back with a letter of his own saying the matter was not open for discussion and scolded Latrobe for broaching the topic. Lane continued with a harsh condemnation of Latrobe for his habit of overreaching the bounds of his office, for recommending incompetent men for employment, and for not preparing estimates and plans with enough speed. Although there was a perfunctory remark acknowledging Latrobe's "professional talents," Lane's response indicated a wholesale lack of confidence in the architect: "My anxious desire is to accelerate not retard the work. . . . Knowing my

duties I shall scrupulously perform them. All that I wish of you is attention to your own.”¹⁰⁴

Lane’s open hostility chipped away at Latrobe’s confidence. His nerves were rattled by the incessant attacks on his skill, faithfulness, judgment, and professionalism—and this from a commissioner who had no business in the office he held, lacking the experience or temperament to oversee the work under his charge. To him, the creative process of architectural design was a luxury that went well beyond necessity, certainly nothing to command respect. Like so many Americans of his time, Lane did not appreciate the skill of an architect and considered bricklaying or carpentry a worthier occupation. Proud of his training and confident of his talents, Latrobe jealously defended his professional “rights” to a man who could not understand the concept. The two men were temperamentally, intellectually, and socially mismatched. And Lane had power where Latrobe had none.

As if Lane were not making life difficult enough, Latrobe was haunted by the prospect of bankruptcy. The old debts incurred in Pittsburgh had not been satisfied, and there were numerous new debts to compound the problem. His rent had not been paid for months. (His landlord was John Van Ness.) Investments in the Washington Canal Company, the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal Company, Fulton’s Ohio Steamboat Company, and lesser ventures were assets on paper only. He kept afloat by taking outside jobs to supplement his meager government salary.

Worries about money and Lane nipping at his heels were aggravations that were sadly put aside when Latrobe learned of the death of his eldest son, Henry, in New Orleans. His death occurred on September 3, 1817, and his father learned of it three weeks later. The young Latrobe was in New Orleans developing plans for a municipal waterworks when he was stricken with yellow fever. His father took the news hard and slipped into a depression that lasted weeks.¹⁰⁵

With his mind clouded by grief and his self-confidence compromised, there can be little wonder that Latrobe’s last audience with President Monroe turned into a senseless act of aggression directed at the crippled commissioner. Lane had already dressed down the architect shortly after his return from yet another trip to Baltimore. “No schoolboy,” Latrobe recalled, could have “borne

patiently” his mistreatment at the hands of the dictatorial commissioner. Latrobe left the office in a fury and refused to speak to Lane until he had cooled down. But the commissioner would not drop the matter, insisting that Latrobe make “immediate concessions for leaving him in a rage, [or] he would immediately look for another Architect.”¹⁰⁶ The scene was replayed on November 20, 1817, at the President’s House with Monroe looking on. This time, Latrobe struck back. As retold by Mary Elizabeth Latrobe, he lunged at the commissioner,

seized him by the collar, and exclaimed, ‘Were you not a cripple I would shake you to atoms, you poor contemptible wretch. Am I to be dictated to by you?’ The President said looking at my husband, ‘Do you know who I am, Sir?’ ‘Yes, I do, and ask your pardon, but when I consider my birth, my family, my education, my talents, I am excusable for any outrage after the provocation I have received from that contemptible character.’¹⁰⁷

Latrobe returned home and wrote a letter of resignation. It was the only course left to him after the scene he made at the President’s House. The letter was addressed to Monroe instead of Lane. He said that he had chosen to leave office over “the sacrifice of all self respect,” apologized for causing worry, and thanked the president for never doubting his skill and integrity. The restoration of the Capitol might be “inconvenienced” by his sudden resignation but he promised to finish all the drawings for the completion of the work.¹⁰⁸ On November 24, 1817, Lane—not Monroe—accepted the resignation.

Less than two weeks after his resignation, Latrobe filed for protection from creditors by declaring bankruptcy. Judge William Cranch (who had served briefly on the old board of commissioners in 1801) ruled that Latrobe could not keep his architectural books and declared that they too must be sold along with his household goods. Latrobe borrowed \$198 to save his library, but everything else was lost to the auctioneer’s gavel. While William Small helped Mary Elizabeth Latrobe pack up books and papers, Latrobe went to Baltimore to arrange for his family’s removal there. During the first week in January 1818 he was committed to the Washington County jail as punishment for debt, and after his release on the 5th he left the federal city to begin again in Baltimore.¹⁰⁹